

THE BOOK OF MORGAN LE FEY

By [LavenderBrown](#)

Author's Note: This is a rewrite. This story was originally posted here at ff.net over the summer. That first version was very much a "rough draft" and I have decided to remove it from the website and post my rewrite instead. The early chapters are quite similar to the original draft version, but rewrites become extensive as the story goes on. The basic plot has stayed the same, but I have added a lot more material for The Trio, both in terms of character and in terms of action. I have upped the rating to R for language, violence and sexual situations. I hope everyone who read the rough draft will consider taking a gander at this version, which I believe is a lot better.

Chapter One: Hermione Arrives

'Ron, Fred, George, Charlie, Ginny! For HEAVEN'S sake, stop playing Quidditch and get inside and get cleaned up!'

Mrs. Weasley's shrill voice pierced the late morning air as she stepped into the back yard, wearing a robe and nightgown.

'Come on, Mum, just a few more minutes!' Fred called, pelting a Bludger at Ginny, who rolled out of the way easily and stuck her tongue out at her older brother.

'RIGHT NOW!' Mrs. Weasley barked.

'Mum!'

'Don't make me tell you again, Fred or George or whoever you are!' Mrs. Weasley snapped, having already turned to go inside to do some last minute cleaning.

'Resistance is futile,' Charlie said, smiling, and he streaked down to the ground on his broom and leapt off lightly. Charlie Weasley--like all the Weasley's--had bright red hair and a healthy smattering of freckles. He was of medium height but had a muscular, stocky build that was shared by his younger brothers, Fred and George, the twins. They followed him and landed, and then came Ron, the youngest Weasley son. Ron was sixteen, tall, and just as freckle-faced as his brothers. He had surpassed all his brothers in height, save Bill, the oldest, who was inside helping his mother with the housework. Ginny was the only daughter, the youngest. She was petite but was slightly taller than her mother; she had darker red hair than her brothers, which she wore long, and was slender and athletic.

'Boys, Ginny, oh lord, you're all a mess,' Mrs. Weasley said as they trooped into the

kitchen. Mrs. Weasley was short and had used to be quite plump, but she had lost weight in the past year and never regained it. 'Get upstairs and shower, for heaven's sake. We have guests coming!'

'It's just Hermione, Mum,' said Ron, filling a glass with cold pumpkin juice and draining it.

'Yes, well, just because she's like family to us doesn't mean we should all greet her looking like slobs, now does it?' Mrs. Weasley said archly. 'I'm sure Hermione places some importance on hygiene and her appearance. But, if you'd rather stay filthy, be my guest. You can all stay down here and help me scrub out the fireplace or clean the toilets instead.'

The Weasley children trooped en masse up the stairs to take showers.

Ron got there first, to the annoyance of his siblings. Hot water in the crowded Weasley household was a precious commodity, and usually disappeared by the time the third person took his or her morning shower.

'Three minutes, Ronnie,' Fred warned, 'or I'm jinxing your broom.'

'Yeah, yeah,' Ron said, brushing past Fred to the bathroom. Ron jumped in the shower, turned the water as hot as it would go and hurriedly scrubbed the dirt from his skin and picked up the shampoo bottle. He rolled his eyes to see that his mother had bought an enormous bottle of Gilderoy Lockhart's Fabulous and Fluffy Hair Rejuvenator. Apparently his former teacher--now residing in St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, his memory having been erased--still had his line of hair care products. Ron gave the shampoo a sniff: pine needles. Well, he thought, at least it's not gardenias or something. He was just rinsing his hair clean when he heard a loud bang on the door.

'Out, now!' one of the twins yelled.

'In a second!' Ron snapped, shutting off the water and grabbing a towel.

'Fred, get his broom,' he heard George say. In a panic Ron wrapped the towel round his waist, and without even pausing to dry his hair, he flung open the door the bathroom.

'Don't even think about touching my broom,' he snapped, causing Fred, who had been on his way up to Ron's attic bedroom to get his Cleansweep, to halt.

'Wouldn't dream of it, ickle Ronnie-kins,' Fred said, smiling mischievously. Ron rolled his eyes and moved past Fred to go upstairs, and shut the door to his room. He flung open his closet door to see Cleansweep safely tucked inside. His tiny owl, Pigwidgeon, lazily opened his eyes from beneath his wing, and then promptly fell back asleep inside his cage.

Ron towelled off and pulled on jeans and an old t-shirt, then looked in the mirror.

‘Dammit, Mum,’ he muttered sourly. Two weeks ago his mother had gone round the house in a frenzy with the scissors, cutting his and the twins' hair so short that it left them looking like nothing so much as bright red prickly pears.

‘Why don't Bill or Charlie look like idiots, too?’ he muttered, taking a comb to his hair. Bill wore his hair shoulder-length and tied back in a ponytail; Charlie kept his reasonably short, but it didn't stick up like a porcupine.

Two weeks' growth had at least restored a little length, he thought. He began to ruffle his hair with his fingers in the hopes of perhaps producing a stylishly messy look that seemed to be all the rage among teenage boys these days. In the end it wound up just looking messy. He gave up in annoyance.

Oh well, he told himself, it's just Hermione. Not like she does anything with her hair, anyway. Not like she'll care about mine.

He then gazed critically at his face. He was very freckly and his hair was streaked with blond--he always got that way in the summer holidays when he spent every minute he could outside, either helping de-gnome the garden or playing Quidditch. His long nose didn't look quite so long when his freckles came out, at least. The month he had spent working in the yard and practicing Quidditch had added several pounds of muscle to his otherwise lanky frame, and that pleased him. At least he didn't look like a walking scarecrow anymore. He smiled at his reflection, then struck a pose, flexing his biceps. In the next instant he snorted in disgust. ‘Git,’ he said out loud.

Face it, he told himself. You'll never be a looker. Bill got the looks in the family.

Ron sat on his bed and bent down to pull on his trainers, thinking about Hermione's arrival. They had hardly written one another at all, and a part of him felt guilty about this. He knew Hermione would be feeling a bit cut off, being the daughter of Muggles; he also knew that she would probably want to talk to someone about what had happened that night, about how Harry might be handling the loss of Sirius, about how he, Ron, was feeling. But Ron simply did not have the energy to write to her about those events. He didn't want to dwell on them, he wanted to forget them. So he had written her only two very short letters, full of nothing but the most mundane small talk he could come up with.

This thought caused Ron to tie his shoelace too tightly. He loosened the lace and put on his other shoe, when it happened. A scream filled his brain and a flash of color exploded before his eyes. He blinked furiously, trying to rid himself of the vision that was building inside his brain, but it seemed only to grow stronger with his efforts to get rid of it. Another scream, then the sound of ripping, followed by a flash of red. Blood was dripping everywhere...

Ron closed his eyes and gripped the sides of his head.

‘Go away,’ he muttered. He shook his head violently, willing the vision to flee, and it did, just as quickly as it had come.

Down to one a day, maybe, he thought, lying back heavily on his bed and closing his eyes again. A week ago he'd have had three or four by this hour of the morning. All month he'd been plagued by brutal visions of...something. Death, he thought. Why else is there screaming and ripping and red everywhere? The visions had started since he had been home from school.

Ron looked down at his arms. They still bore the faint traces of scar tissue from where he'd been attacked, where the tentacles of a brain had latched onto him and burned not only his flesh but his mind. He hadn't really understood Madam Pomfrey when she told him that sometimes thoughts left the worst scars. But now, after a month of visions that had only just started to dwindle, he knew exactly what she meant, and he appreciated for the first time just how Harry must feel every time he was faced with a violent vision of something horrible happening to someone else.

His parents knew, of course, about what had happened at the end of term last year, when Ron had followed Harry and Hermione (and Ginny, Neville and Luna had come along) to the Ministry of Magic and entered the Department of Mysteries in search of Sirius Black. Instead, they walked into a carefully placed trap, and a dozen Death Eaters had attacked them. Hermione had been hit by a particularly brutal spell that had nearly killed her. Sirius had died. And everyone else had been left with painful injuries and even more painful memories.

But Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were not aware of Ron's visions. He couldn't bring himself to tell them. His mother would panic and his father would only be bewildered.

No, Ron, thought firmly, ruffling his hair again, I'll just have to deal with this on my own.

'Ron, come set the table, will you?' Mrs. Weasley called.

'Coming, Mum,' Ron called back, exiting his room and descending the stairs. The kitchen was in its usual chaos, with Mrs. Weasley, Ginny and Bill preparing breakfast, Fred and George sweeping the floors--and scowling the whole time--and Charlie washing dishes. Mr. Weasley had already gone to work early that morning, but would be returning shortly with Hermione.

'Took long enough getting ready,' Fred said dryly. 'Fixing your hair? Or did you cut yourself shaving?' He and George sniggered. Ron, to his own shame, had not begun shaving yet. Every day he checked his reflection for some sign of facial hair that would signal this rite of passage toward manhood. So far all that had appeared was the barest hint of thin, pale peach fuzz on his cheeks and over his lip, so miniscule as to be unnoticeable. It gave Fred and George--who shaved daily now--no end of mirth.

'Shut up,' Ron said defensively, not looking at the twins, pleased at the very least that he was taller than they, and had developed a deeper voice.

'Stop picking on Ron,' Mrs. Weasley warned.

'It's okay, Mum,' Ron mumbled, feeling his ears get hot. He hated when his mother rushed to his defence. Just because he was the youngest boy in the family didn't make

him the baby--that was Ginny, he thought. Let Mum coddle her. He began to set plates on the table and fill the water glasses, when a car pulled into the drive.

'Oh, that's Arthur and Hermione,' Mrs. Weasley announced. 'Fred, George, do something about that dust!'

George took out his wand, waved it at the pile of dust he and Fred had just swept up, and muttered '*Evanesco*.' The dust vanished. Charlie finished the dishes by waving his wand and saying '*Scourgify*.'

Mr. Weasley had been given the use of a new Ministry car. It was not only useful but, according to Mrs. Weasley, the least Cornelius Fudge could do 'after the shabby way he treated Arthur all last year.' The car was a Ford Taurus, newer and nicer than the old Ford Anglia Mr. Weasley used to have.

'Bill, go and help your father with Hermione's trunk, will you?' Mrs. Weasley said absently, stirring some oatmeal.

'Got eggs on my hands, Mum,' Bill said, 'in a minute.'

'I've got it,' said Ron, setting down the last water glass and heading out the front screen door.

It was very sunny now, and Ron had to squint against the brilliant daylight. He could just make out the shape of his father, a thin, balding man of medium height who wore glasses. Hermione was not with him.

'Morning, Dad,' Ron said. 'Where's Hermione?'

'She just went round back to let Crookshanks have a run-around,' said Mr. Weasley. 'Grab this end of her trunk for me, will you?'

Ron gripped the handle of one end of Hermione's trunk and together with his father, lifted it and carried it inside. It was very heavy.

'Just put it over there, Arthur,' Mrs. Weasley said, putting the pot of oatmeal on the table. 'The boys can take it upstairs later.' Mr. Weasley and Ron dropped Hermione's trunk with a loud clunk.

'I'm off back to work, dear,' Mr. Weasley announced. 'Won't be needing the car so it'll stay here. See you this evening. Be good!' He kissed his wife on the cheek.

'Bye, Dad!' came a chorus of voices, and with a loud CRACK! Mr. Weasley disappeared.

'Where's Hermione?' Mrs. Weasley asked, looking round the kitchen.

'Out back,' said Ron. 'I'll get her.'

He crossed to the back door and went outside. Again his eyes had to adjust to the

bright sunlight. As his eyes came into focus he saw a girl kneeling down in the grass next to a bandy-legged ginger cat. She had long, shiny brown hair pulled back into a sleek ponytail and she was very tan. She wore a pair of denim shorts over slim, bronze legs, a brightly colored, flowery blouse with short sleeves that hugged her just right and highlighted a rather lovely bosom, and a pair of sandals that revealed brightly painted toes. Ron blinked.

‘Hermione?’

‘Ron! Hi!’ Hermione leapt up, patting her hair.

‘Wow,’ he blurted, not moving, still staring. ‘You look...different.’ Did she ever.

‘Yes,’ she said, flushing slightly and patting her hair again. ‘I went on holiday, Mum and Dad took me to the Italian Riviera, it was lovely.’ Obviously she thought he was referring to her tan.

‘No, I mean, your clothes, and your hair,’ Ron said. And your legs and your cleavage...he thought.

When did Hermione get cleavage? Stop looking at her cleavage!

His eyes kept skipping over her despite his mental protests to the contrary. He couldn’t help it. This was as bad as when Hermione showed up at the Yule Ball, looking all glamorous. No, it was worse. At least back then she had robes on. Now she was wearing Muggle clothes that were showing off parts he hadn’t really be aware she had. Didn’t she know that her shirt was a bit risqué, to say the least?

‘Oh, that,’ said Hermione, who didn’t seem to notice that his face was a bit flushed. ‘Mum took me shopping in London. It’s not too...trendy, do you think? I’m not really used to dressing like this. And my hair. I mean, I usually don’t bother with it, you know. But it’s okay, is it?’ She looked down at her outfit and then back up at Ron with a questioning look in her eye.

Ron was suddenly aware that he was standing there with his mouth open. He shut it.

‘It’s...okay, yeah,’ he said, his eyes darting away from her.

‘Really?’ she asked uncertainly. ‘I don’t look silly or anything?’

‘No!’ said Ron quickly. ‘You...uh...you look nice. So how’s your summer?’ he added quickly, feeling very uncomfortable for some reason. His stomach had suddenly begun to flop around like a fish out of water. He wondered if the sweets he’d eaten last night were rebelling.

‘Not bad,’ Hermione said. ‘Well, the Italian Riviera is quite beautiful and the beaches are lovely. I would have preferred to go to Florence or Venice myself. You know, see the artwork and the gardens. Italy has such incredible artwork. And the history of the Italian renaissance wizards and witches is absolutely fascinating, how it ties in with

the Inquisition. But a beach holiday is always relaxing. Of course everyone in the Riviera sunbathes naked, so that took some getting used to. I didn't, of course, Mum never would have let me, but it's quite amazing to see, really. People who simply don't care a whit if you see them in the altogether. I can't tell you how many people waved to us and said hello, and there they were with their bits just hanging out. Maybe when I'm of age I'll give it a whirl. When in Rome and everything. It does seem rather liberating, in fact. Except I imagine you'd have to be extra careful about sunscreen.'

'Right,' said Ron, taken aback. His eyes were like saucers and his ears were so hot they felt as though they might spontaneously combust. Hermione was talking about getting naked on a beach. She never talked about such things. Good lord. She'd gone mental on him.

'So how about you?' Hermione asked, picking up Crookshanks and scratching him behind the ears. He began to purr loudly.

'Me?' Ron said quickly. 'Uh, no, I didn't sunbathe naked.' He blinked and looked away.

Hermione laughed. 'No, silly, I meant how was your summer?'

'Right!' Ron said quickly, and he forced himself to laugh, feeling very stupid and not having any idea why he felt like running into the house at the moment, or why his stomach kept flip-flopping, or why his ears were so hot. 'Uh, you know. Not much. Just helping Mum with house stuff, de-gnoming the garden, playing Quidditch. The usual.'

There was a silence. He looked at her and she met his eyes and Ron felt his stomach lurch again. She put Crookshanks down and walked up to him and gave him a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek. He caught the scent of lilacs as she pulled away.

'Well, it's good to see you,' she said, smiling, and Ron noticed again how very perfect her teeth were. Of course, she had had Madam Pomfrey fix them in fourth year. The difference in Hermione's smile was striking.

'Good to see you,' he said. 'Should we go in? Mum's cooked a huge breakfast, as usual.'

'Okay,' she said, and she started for the house, her ponytail swinging. It was very shiny and almost hypnotic and Ron, following her with his eyes fixed on it, stumbled on a flagstone. He straightened up, thankful that she hadn't noticed he'd tripped, and his eyes went from her ponytail to...good lord, those shorts she had on were way too tight.

'Hermione!' Mrs. Weasley squeaked, wiping her hands on her apron as Hermione entered the kitchen. She gave Hermione a hug and then stepped back to look at her. 'Oh, my goodness, you look absolutely lovely! What did you do to your hair?'

But before Hermione could answer, the rest of the Weasley family was hugging her in turn, Ginny gushing as enthusiastically as Mrs. Weasley about Hermione's new

hairstyle.

They sat down and began to eat. The conversation was mainly directed at Hermione who talked enthusiastically about her holiday in Italy and once again discussed the sunbathing habits of the natives. Fred and George gave each other sly looks and then looked back at Hermione, and Ron saw that they seemed to be regarding her in an entirely different light. But Ron couldn't help notice that Hermione was barely touching her food.

'Tuck in, Hermione,' Mrs. Weasley encouraged. 'You're looking a bit thin, I think. You need feeding up.' And to emphasize her point, Mrs. Weasley dished up healthy helpings of bacon and eggs onto Hermione's plate. She smiled and ate slowly, picking at her food. Ron, too, had very little appetite--his stomach would not seem to calm down--but he forced himself to make a good show of it, at least.

The meal wound down with Fred and George belching loudly in turn.

'Fantastic eats as usual, Mum,' said Fred heartily.

'Well, thank you dear,' said Mrs. Weasley, her jaw slightly fixed. 'But I'd appreciate it if you didn't express your satisfaction with my cooking by belching at the table.'

Everyone laughed at this, even Mrs. Weasley, who began to clear the table. Hermione offered to help, but Mrs. Weasley shooed her away. 'Nonsense, dear, you've had a long morning. You can unpack later if you like. Bill, you and Charlie take Hermione's trunk upstairs, would you?'

Charlie said, 'I've got it.' He waved his wand at Hermione's trunk as he picked up Crookshanks' crate and said '*Locomotor* trunk!', and the trunk levitated and floated upstairs behind him.

'Come on, Hermione,' said Ginny, 'I'll help you unpack.'

'Oh, thanks,' said Hermione. 'See you later, Ron.' She smiled at him in a friendly way and started up the stairs.

Ron watched her go, his eyes drawn to her tanned legs. His eyes moved higher.

'Wow,' said Fred. He had moved right next to Ron and was watching where Hermione had just been. 'Since when did she get so gorgeous?'

'Italy agreed with her,' said George. 'Nice tan.'

'Nice hair,' said Fred.

'Nice legs,' said George. 'Close your mouth, Ron.'

'Shut up,' Ron mumbled. His ears were hot again.

Chapter Two: Quidditch and Classic Quotes

By the afternoon Hermione had unpacked and Ron and his siblings were getting ready to play Quidditch for the second time that day. Mrs. Weasley set out a platter with glasses of lemonade, which they all took gratefully. Hermione came outside to the join them.

Ron was hovering just a few feet off the ground on his Cleansweep when he looked up and saw her.

'Hi, Ron!' she called brightly, waving. She had on a black bikini and a pair of denim cut-offs. Ron's mouth dropped open at the sight of her and he fell off his broom, landing with a thud on the grass.

'Ron, are you okay?' said Hermione, rushing over to him and coming to a halt in front of him. He heard the sniggering of the twins and felt his ears go hot as he looked up at her, his eyes now lingering just a bit on the curve of her hip. When did she get curvy hips? And her tummy. It was slim but had a bit of roundness to it. Very...girly.

'I'm fine,' he said quickly, jumping up from the ground and looking away from her. He felt ridiculous. He wished she'd go and put on some damn clothes. Didn't she realize she looked indecent? That her near-nakedness was bloody distracting? That she looked like a...Scarlet Woman?

It's just Hermione, you git, Ron thought. Tan, smooth-skinned, half-naked Hermione.

Fred and George whistled at her as she sat down on a rickety old lawn chair.

'Knock it off,' Ron snapped, but Hermione simply rolled her eyes and opened a small paperback book.

'What're you reading, Hermione?' Ginny asked, plucking a few stray twigs from her broom.

'*Romeo and Juliet*,' she answered.

'Ro--what?' Ron asked.

'*Romeo and Juliet*,' Hermione repeated slowly. 'It's a play by Shakespeare.'

'Shakespeare?' Fred asked, screwing up his face as though he'd just smelled a dungbomb.

'William Shakespeare,' said Hermione, scanning the faces of the Weasley children. To a one, they were all blank. 'William Shakespeare. Perhaps the greatest poet and playwright in all of England. The author of such memorable phrases as "to thine own self be true" and "my kingdom for a horse" and "what fools these mortals be"?'"

George looked at Fred and shook his head. 'Is he a Muggle?'

‘Yes, but that’s not important,’ Hermione said, her voice rising and slightly indignant. ‘William Shakespeare is perhaps the most gifted craftsman of the English language to ever live. I can’t BELIEVE you’ve never heard of him! Everyone’s heard of him! How can you possibly grow up in England without knowing who Shakespeare is?’

‘Same way we got through life without fellytones, I guess,’ said Ron, smiling in spite of himself.

‘Telephones,’ Hermione corrected. ‘And that’s not the same thing. Shakespeare is not some sort of practical thing like a telephone.’

‘Then why bother with him?’ George asked, rolling his eyes.

‘Because...because he’s a great poet and playwright!’ Hermione cried. ‘His poetry, it’s beautiful, it touches the soul. It has a magic all its own, really!’

‘No offence, Hermione,’ said Ron, smiling at her wryly and enjoying how she thoroughly exasperated she looked, ‘but if you haven’t convinced me by now to read *Hogwarts, a History*, there’s no way I’m going near anything by that Shakeshoe bloke.’

‘ShakeSPEARE,’ said Hermione ‘and perhaps if you’d open your narrow little mind you might find out that you enjoy reading it.’

‘We have enough books to read for school,’ Ron retorted, rolling his eyes. ‘Honestly, Hermione, don’t you do anything BUT read?’

‘Yes!’ Hermione said shrilly, but everyone chuckled rather heartily at this.

‘I do!’ she protested again, her voice higher, and she stood up.

‘Like what?’ Fred asked. ‘And by the way, studying doesn’t count.’

‘Well, I...I spent a lot of time on the beach this summer,’ she said, raising her chin slightly.

‘We noticed,’ said George, looking her up and down. ‘Nice tan. But lemme guess, you were reading, right?’

‘I took walks,’ she said. ‘I went to the shops with my Mum.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ said Fred. ‘But did you DO anything?’

‘Like what?’ Hermione retorted, putting her hands on her hips.

‘How about Quidditch?’ George asked. ‘Fancy a game with us?’

‘Oh, really!’

‘Aw, come on, Hermione,’ said Fred, grinning. ‘It’ll be fun. You DO know what fun

is, don't you?'

'Yes,' Hermione said haughtily.

'Leave her alone,' said Ron, feeling very irritable with Fred and George. 'If she doesn't want to play, she doesn't have to play.'

'You think I can't do it?' Hermione said sharply, whirling on him.

'Who said that?' Ron said, caught off guard. 'I just said--'

'You just thought because I study all the time and get good marks and what that I'm no good at...athletics,' said Hermione accusingly. 'Well, maybe I am. Maybe I will play Quidditch after all.'

'Okay, play then!' Ron said, alarmed by this sudden burst of temper from her.

'I will!'

'I'll go get the spare broom,' Ginny said quickly, clearing wanting to duck out before Ron and Hermione dissolved into another of their now infamous rows.

But Hermione said nothing else and settled for glaring at Ron. Ron gave her a quizzical look--what was she picking on him for? He was just trying to spare her Fred and George's merciless teasing. But then she looked away and folded her arms across her chest.

'What position do you want?' Ginny asked as she came back outside with a second broomstick in hand. She was followed by Charlie, who wore an old pair of shorts and a Chudley Cannons t-shirt.

'I...what?' Hermione asked, looking surprised.

'Position,' Ginny repeated. 'You know, Chaser, Beater, Seeker...'

'Oh, right,' said Hermione, feeling very awkward. 'Um, well, what are you playing, Ginny?'

'Chaser,' said Ginny. 'Numbers are a bit off to have a Seeker, so we'll just work on goal-scoring, if that's okay.'

'Okay,' Hermione said, and Ron saw to his immense satisfaction that she suddenly looked very nervous.

'Let's get going,' he said loudly, mounting his Cleansweep and kicking off into the air. He swooped around and hovered eight feet above the ground.

'Right,' said Hermione, and she suddenly looked very white. She took the broom from Ginny--it was very old and ragged looking--and swung a long leg over it. She had a look of intense concentration on her face as she kicked off from the ground. The

broom lurched up and she gave a squeak. Ron swallowed a laugh.

Ginny flew over to her side, confidently astride her broom.

‘Okay there, Hermione?’ she asked brightly.

‘I think so,’ Hermione said in a shaky voice. ‘I mean, I hardly ever fly, you know.’

‘Nothing to it,’ she said. ‘I told George and Fred to take it easy on you or I’ll rat on them to Mum--that’ll keep them in line. Anyway, you know the rules, right?’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Hermione, gripping the handle of her broom. ‘I take that Quaffle and try to throw it through, uh...’

‘Over there,’ said Ginny, indicating two rather rickety make-shift hoops. ‘Either one will do. Of course normally you’ve got three, but anyway. So, we’re doing smaller teams here. Fred and George are both Beaters but they’re beating on opposite teams. George is going to try and hit you with the Bludger, so watch out, but don’t worry about it, just keep your eyes on Ron. You’ll have Fred defending you and he’s going to try and hit me, who’s Chasing on the other team. Charlie is playing Keeper on the other side. He’s Keeper for you. So that means you have to try and score on Ron, who’s keeping over there. See? He’s really good these days, but Charlie’s the best, so I’ll have a tougher time of it, but it balances out.’

‘Hey, thanks, Ginny,’ Ron called sarcastically, not wanting any sort of reminder about his mostly dismal performance as Keeper last year.

‘I’m sure this conversation is absolutely *fascinating*,’ Fred called, ‘but the rest of us would really like to play Quidditch sometime this century.’

‘Right!’ Ginny called. ‘Good luck,’ she added, winking at Hermione, who wobbled again on her broom. Ginny zoomed over to the middle of the yard.

‘Okay!’ Charlie yelled. ‘Hermione, I’m giving the Quaffle to you to start. We’ll let you see how it feels to score a few goals first, okay, before we get Ginny in there.’

‘All right,’ said Hermione, her voice very squeaky. Charlie tossed her the bright red ball. She caught it, but clumsily, and in letting go of her broom she nearly slid off the side.

‘Careful!’ Ron yelled, and in the next instant he was next to her, hovering on his broom and helping her sit upright. His hands made contact with the skin of her back. She blushed.

‘I’m off to a wonderful start, aren’t I?’ she said sheepishly.

‘You’ll be fine,’ Ron said, starting back toward his goal posts, his hands tingling. He’d never touched her there before. He hadn’t touched her much of anywhere before, actually.

‘Yeah, you can’t be any more miserable than Ronnie was last year!’ Fred called.

‘Shut up,’ Ron growled. ‘We won the Cup, didn’t we?’

‘Okay, Hermione,’ Charlie called. ‘Put the Quaffle under your arm, right? Just start heading toward Ron. Don’t worry about anything else at the moment; George is going to aim the Bludger toward you but let Fred worry about it. Just keep your eyes on Ron, okay?’

‘Right,’ Hermione yelled, her voice again squeaky. Ron bit back a grin as she wobbled on the broom again, her legs flailing.

‘Go!’ Charlie yelled, and Hermione spurred her broom forward. It jerked and she nearly fell off the back.

‘You okay?’ Ron called, looking alarmed.

‘Fine!’ Hermione yelled back, righting herself with a determined expression. She applied more speed to the broom. Ron was circling easily around the two goal posts.

George pelted the Bludger at her and she dodged it, but it looked to Ron as though she hadn’t done that on purpose.

As Hermione came closer to Ron she began to look panicky. He wondered if maybe he should just let her score a goal, then decided against it. She’d probably be offended.

Hermione’s broom wobbled again, and she gripped it and pulled up on the handle, causing it to shoot upward. She gave a little hooting scream, then righted herself and aimed down, trying to control her flight. She then flew resolutely toward Ron. She aimed for the right hand goal hoop and heaved the Quaffle toward it. Ron blocked it easily with the end of his broom, and sent the Quaffle flying past Hermione, where Ginny caught it.

‘Not bad!’ Ginny called encouragingly.

‘Really?’ Hermione said weakly, circling around, her knuckles white as she clutched the broom handle.

‘Don’t grip your broom so tightly, Hermione,’ Charlie said as he zoomed in right next to her. ‘Relax a bit. That broom’s pretty ancient, but it’ll take you where you want to go if you ease up on it. Trust it, okay?’

‘Right,’ said Hermione determinedly.

‘Want to go again?’

‘All right,’ she said, taking the Quaffle from Ginny and heading back to the centre of the make-shift pitch.

‘Okay, Hermione, just like I said,’ Charlie coached. ‘Nice and easy. Go!’

Hermione, looking a bit more confident, turned her broom and set off toward Ron again. She leaned slightly to the right on the broom and rolled upside down and then back upright again.

‘Oh!’ she screamed, slowing down a bit.

‘It’s okay!’ Ginny called. ‘Just a simple roll, Hermione. Go with it!’

‘Oh!’ she screamed again, as the broom went into a second roll. Ron couldn’t help it, he started to laugh behind his hand. She barely managed to avoid a third roll by leaning slightly to the left.

‘Ron!’ she yelled indignantly.

‘Good one,’ Ron croaked, now laughing out loud.

‘Don’t laugh!’ Hermione snapped, and suddenly she was zooming toward him, a very angry look on her face. She swung hard to the left, her legs flailing a bit.

Ron anticipated and veered left, but at the very last second Hermione banked hard to the right and hurled the Quaffle through the right hoop as hard as she could. She rolled on her broom again and gave another little shriek.

‘Good one, Hermione!’ Charlie and Ginny yelled together.

Ron retrieved the Quaffle, thoroughly annoyed with himself. How had he let that one get by him? It was such an easy feint, and she could barely control her broom!

‘Nice one, eh, Ronnie,’ Fred teased. ‘We’ll make a Quidditch player out of Hermione yet.’

‘I don’t know about that, Fred,’ Hermione said, with an air of modesty. Ron snorted.

‘Beginner’s luck,’ he said coolly, glancing at Hermione.

‘What?’ Hermione snapped. ‘Really? Well, we’ll see about that.’

‘One more go, Hermione?’ Charlie asked.

‘Yes, please,’ Hermione said, keeping her glittering eyes fixed on Ron. He stared back at her and a smile curled his lip.

She took the Quaffle again and began to circle. She did a couple of rolls--this time on purpose--and came out of them with almost no trouble. Then she looped behind the goal posts. She was obviously trying to get more comfortable on the broom. Ron couldn’t resist teasing her.

‘While we’re young, Hermione,’ he said sarcastically.

She gave him a cool, appraising look, and streaked past him, fainting a bit right.

Ron didn't take the bait. She turned again and streaked past him in the opposite direction, going behind the goal posts.

Again, Ron didn't follow, but he shifted slightly, covering both posts more evenly.

She swerved yet again and turned, flying toward Ron again. She was halfway across him when she swerved sharply downward at an angle. Ron had anticipated and this time he jerked down just as she threw the Quaffle toward the hoop. He caught it.

'Beginner's luck,' he repeated, grinning, and he tossed the Quaffle in the air with the intention of catching it.

In the next instant Hermione cried out and put a hand on her side, and in so doing she let go of her broom and fell right off it. She screamed.

'Hermione!' Ron swooped down and got under her just as she fell hard against him. The impact knocked the wind out of him, and sent them both plummeting toward the ground.

'Ron!' Charlie yelled, and suddenly everyone was shooting toward them on their brooms.

Up, up! Ron thought wildly pulling up on the handle of his broom with his left hand as his right arm went around Hermione's waist to keep her from falling. The broom slowed and came to a halt just a few feet above the ground.

They hovered there for a moment. Hermione's eyes were squeezed shut, she had managed to wrap an arm around Ron's neck and was holding onto him so tightly that he was having trouble breathing.

'Are you all right?' Ginny cried, running toward them, her broom on the ground nearby. Charlie and the twins were right behind her.

'Fine,' Ron choked. 'Uh, Hermione, my neck...'

'Oh!' she said, loosening her grip, but she did not let go of him. She was trembling like a leaf, and her other hand still clutched at her side.

'Hermione, what's wrong?' Ron asked, suddenly very concerned. His feet were on the ground now and he tried to ease Hermione from his broom.

Hermione seemed to come to herself as she put her feet on the ground.

'I'm...I'm fine,' she said, letting go of Ron. He removed his arm from around her waist. 'I'm fine. I just...lost my balance.'

'You sure?' Ron asked, studying her face. She looked like she was in pain, and now both hands were on her side. He exchanged looks with Fred and George.

'I'm fine!' Hermione repeated impatiently. 'Honestly. I just...I need to sit down. I think...I think I've played enough for one day.'

'Oh, okay,' said Ron. 'Maybe we should all just--'

'Don't stop on my account!' Hermione said, with an edge to her voice. 'I mean, I have my book,' she added quickly, in a softer voice. She looked up at Ron with a kind of pleading expression. 'Really. Go on. I'll be fine.'

Ron nodded, but suddenly he was no longer in the mood to play Quidditch. He took his time getting back on to his broom. When he ascended back up to the make-shift goal posts his eyes wandered back to Hermione, who was sitting on the lawn chair with her book open. She turned a page, and Ron saw that her hand was shaking.

Chapter Three: Tea at Midnight

Dinner that night in the Weasley house was a quieter affair. Fred and George were not there, having announced they were meeting Lee Jordan and a few other friends in Diagon Alley for dinner. Bill was out with Fleur.

Mrs. Weasley seemed especially terse tonight, and Ron knew it was because Charlie was leaving tomorrow morning to return to Romania. He had made some progress in recruiting foreign wizards to assist in the Order of the Phoenix but had to return to his job studying dragons.

Mr. Weasley seemed to be the only one who was talkative. He spoke at length about the many changes that had occurred in the Ministry in the past month.

'All these new security measures,' he said over his glass of wine. 'The Wizengamot is so concerned they're debating whether to introduce legislation to ban Apparating and Disapparating from the Ministry. I hope not. The car is nice, of course, but it's so much quicker to just Apparate there.'

'What about the Floo Network?' Mrs. Weasley asked, taking Ron's plate and piling it high with roast chicken, potatoes and green beans.

'The Ministry has Aurors at various posts, but I can't see that lasting,' Mr. Weasley said thoughtfully. 'The Aurors are needed for hunting out You Know Who's followers, after all. Aurors are too important, and too talented, to waste on guard duty at Ministry fireplaces.'

'Fudge has certainly been under fire all month,' Charlie said. 'Not that I feel too sorry for him. But if things start to get really bad out there and You Know Who's followers start killing again, Fudge could be out of a job. Half the Wizengamot is furious with him--they knew all along Dumbledore was telling the truth but Fudge wouldn't do anything about it.'

‘Good riddance to bad luggage,’ Mrs. Weasley said, her eyes glittering dangerously. ‘Fudge was always more concerned with his own power than he was with what’s best for the Ministry and everyone else.’

‘Sounds like someone else I know,’ Charlie said darkly, taking a mouthful of potatoes.

‘Don’t start in on Percy again!’ Mrs. Weasley warned. ‘He’s still your brother, isn’t he?’

‘Unfortunately,’ said Charlie, taking a sip of his wine. ‘Honestly, Mum, I know he’s your son, but why the hell hasn’t he written or called on you to apologize? After the way he treated you and Dad? And Ron nearly died in that fight last month. But Percy’s nowhere to be found, is he?’

‘He’s probably too ashamed to talk to us,’ Mr. Weasley said, his face very set now. Mrs. Weasley dished Hermione up some food but seemed to do it a bit too vehemently, and potatoes spluttered onto the table.

‘As well he should be,’ Charlie said firmly. ‘Times are bad enough, we ought to be sticking together.’

‘He’ll come around,’ Mrs. Weasley said, in a voice that indicated the discussion of Percy was closed. Charlie got the hint and took a bite of chicken.

Hermione, Ron and Ginny had said nothing. The subject of Percy was still a very sore one, and every time Ron thought about his older brother he felt a flash of hot anger. He didn’t really care if Percy treated him shabbily, but Percy had slammed the door in his mother’s face, literally, when she tried to talk to him, and had spent the whole year ignoring his father every time they crossed paths at work. He hadn’t even bothered to visit Mr. Weasley when he was in hospital. To hell with Percy’s pride, Ron thought savagely as he dug into his green beans. You Know Who’s cronies nearly killed Dad and me, and Ginny, too; the least he could do is apologize.

He felt Hermione’s eyes on him and looked at her. She gave him a sympathetic smile and he smiled back in spite of himself. She was eating a bit more tonight, at least, and she seemed to have fully recovered from the scare of falling off her broom earlier that day.

The meal ended with barely another word of conversation. Ron helped his mother clear plates, while Mr. Weasley began to wash dishes with Charlie. Ginny and Hermione walked upstairs, apparently to Ginny’s room, and Ron, not wanting to go upstairs just yet, offered to help.

After a few minutes the dishes were done, and Ron figured he might as well go upstairs to his room.

He started up the stairs and was just on the second floor landing when he nearly collided with Hermione, who was just exiting the bathroom wearing a fluffy white bathrobe. Her long hair was wet and her skin pink.

‘Oh!’ she said, startled. ‘Um, sorry.’

‘No problem,’ Ron said softly. It was a narrow hallway and as he moved around to get to the staircase up to his room, he brushed against her and caught a whiff of her shampoo. It was the familiar scent of lilacs.

‘Well, good night then,’ she said, backing slowly into Ginny’s room. She seemed a bit skittish and Ron wondered if she had been thinking about her fall.

‘Are you sure you’re okay, Hermione?’ he asked, taking a step toward her.

‘I’m fine,’ she said quickly. ‘Just fine. Good night.’ Her right hand was clutching her side again, but before he could ask she had gone inside Ginny’s room and shut the door.

‘Good night,’ Ron said quietly to Ginny’s door. He shook his head and started up the stairs.

He made it upstairs just in time for another vision to attack him. Images of blood dripping flashed before his eyes and the sounds of screams and tearing filled his ears. He sank to his knees and closed his eyes, willing the vision to go away, and again it did, almost as quickly as before.

He sat on his knees on the floor in the middle of his room, breathing hard. The visions were less frequent now and he seemed better able to get rid of them, but they left him drained and scared. He had never learned just whose memories he was reliving, and somehow this disturbed as much as the horrible memories themselves. Whose death was it that he was seeing? The person whose brain had burned him? Someone else? Did it have anything to do with You Know Who?

He got up slowly and shook his head. Maybe he’d sleep better tonight. He was exhausted; the multiple Quidditch matches he’d played in the hot sun had worn him out. And maybe the vision he’d just had meant that he wouldn’t have anymore when he fell asleep. He peeled off his clothes, slipped on pyjamas, and flopped into bed.

An hour later he was still wide awake, staring at the ceiling. His mind drifted back to Hermione. Something was different about her. It was not just the way she looked. There was a nervousness there he had never seen in her before.

She’s always been the cautious one, he told himself, which was true. She was always lecturing him and Harry about rule breaking--especially since she had become a prefect. She had always been the one to warn him or Harry when they were about to do something reckless or stupid. She had even informed on them to teachers in the past when she was convinced they were up to something dangerous.

But this is different, another voice in his head said. She’s cautious, sure, but hasn’t she always jumped in with Harry and me at the end? Hasn’t she broken her share of rules? Ron turned his thoughts over and over in his head, but he simply couldn’t place the change in Hermione in a logical way. He simply knew in his heart that she had changed. He could only guess it had something to do with what had happened in the

Ministry that night. She had nearly died from that Death Eater's spell--it was only the fact that she'd thrown a Silencing Charm on him that prevented him from saying the incantation that might have killed her. She had been unconscious for two days.

He shuddered, and realized he didn't want to think about Hermione lying motionless and near death in the hospital wing. He didn't want to think about what it might have meant for her to die. Mainly because before that horrible night, he'd never thought about her not being around. She'd always been there, a constant in his life, even before they became friends. It was true that she drove him mad sometimes, with her nagging and her obsession with elf rights and the way she belittled Quidditch and her rigid belief that her own point of view was always the right one. But as he thought about what it might mean for Hermione not to be around to do all the little things that annoyed him, he realized that he'd miss those things nearly as much as those things about her that he liked.

After another hour of staring at the ceiling, Ron groaned in frustration and got out of bed. It was no good. He might as well get up and do something now, because sleep wasn't coming.

He pulled on a robe and padded downstairs, past Ginny's room and down to the first floor. Perhaps one of his mother's many herbal infusions would help him sleep.

He reached the first floor and looked across the living room to see someone sitting on the couch. It was Hermione. Her knees were pulled up to her chest, and Crookshanks lay on the couch next to her, purring.

'Hermione?'

'Oh!' She jumped and whirled around, looking terrified. Then she let out a sigh of relief. 'Ron. You startled me.'

'Sorry,' he said. Why was she so jumpy? 'What are you doing down here?'

'I couldn't sleep,' she said, running a hand through her now-dry hair. She was wearing a thin cotton robe over her pyjamas. Her hair looked very pretty, but Ron couldn't help but miss the frizzy curls. It had just been more...her.

'Yeah,' he muttered, crossing to her. 'Me neither. I was, uh, just gonna make some tea. Want some?'

'Won't that just keep us awake?'

'Nah, it's one of Mum's herbal things,' he said.

'Okay,' she said. 'I'll help you.'

She walked into the kitchen ahead of him, trailing the faint scent of lilacs again. Had she always smelled like lilacs and just never noticed it? he wondered. Then he thought of the perfume he'd given her last Christmas. Truthfully he hadn't given all that much thought to what scent he was choosing, he just found one that reminded him of her; he

bought it and had almost immediately forgotten about it. Perhaps she was wearing it, he thought, but then again he couldn't figure why she'd put on perfume if she was planning on going to bed. He only knew that the scent was...lovely. That she looked rather lovely in her pyjamas with her hair falling down her back. He swallowed and shook his head.

It's just Hermione, he thought for the hundredth or so time since she'd arrived at The Burrow. Yes, she's a girl, and she's a nice looking girl, but she's still just Hermione. Think about tea.

Together they prepared the tea: Hermione put on the kettle and Ron got out a tin of herbs and filled the pot. Hermione sat down at the kitchen table and winced, clutching at her ribs again.

'You all right?' Ron said quickly, taking a few steps toward her.

'It's fine,' she said, but her face was locked in a grimace. 'Just, you know, the after effects of...' Her voice trailed off.

'Right,' said Ron, taking a seat at the end of the table so that he was next to her.

'It's been hurting a bit all summer,' she said, not looking at him. 'I had all those potions Madam Pomfrey gave me but they're almost gone. They help a little, anyway.'

'I haven't been sleeping much,' Ron said, without thinking, not meaning to get himself drawn into a conversation about what had happened to them at the end of last term. But now that he had started, he found he could not stop. 'Madam Pomfrey told me I'd have scars, the kind you can't see. I didn't know what she meant. I thought she was talking about, you know, my arms.' He pulled up the sleeve of his pyjamas and showed Hermione the slightly puckered burn scars left by the brain.

Hermione took his arm gently and ran her finger lightly over the scar. Ron felt like ice had been poured down his back, and he shivered, but it was not an unpleasant sensation. In fact, it was...exciting. Which was entirely ridiculous.

'Does it hurt?' Hermione asked, still trailing her fingers over the scars. He shivered again and his stomach flip-flopped. He blinked and shook his head again, wondering why he was feeling so strange. Okay, so he and Hermione had never been touchy-feely with one another, but lots of people had touched those scars on his arms, and he'd never felt so weird about it.

'No,' Ron said quickly, pulling his sleeve down. 'Not anymore. But I have these...flashes. Visions, I guess. I feel like Harry, you know? I'm seeing things but it's not real, it's just someone's memories. Only I don't know whose memories they are. But someone...someone's dying in them. In a really bad way.'

'Oh, Ron,' Hermione said sadly, and to his astonishment her eyes filled with tears.

‘It’s okay,’ he said quickly, for he hated to see her cry. ‘I mean, it’s getting better. I’m not having as many as I used to. Madam Pomfrey told me they’d go away.’

‘I know, it’s just...’ Her voice trailed off, and she stood up and crossed to the stove where the teakettle was just beginning to steam. She took the kettle off the burner and stood with her back to him, when her shoulders began to shake.

‘What?’ he asked, getting up and following her. ‘What’s wrong?’ Very awkwardly he put a hand on her shoulder.

To his surprise she turned and almost collapsed into him, wrapping her arms around his waist and burying her head into his chest. He was almost as terrified at that moment as he had been the last time she’d flung herself on him, in their third year. But this time instead of patting her on the head he found himself putting his arms around her and stroking her hair. His heart was racing. They stayed like that for several minutes, Ron caressing her hair, resting his cheek on the top of her head. It was...nice.

She pulled away from him, and he felt cold.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, wiping her eyes. ‘I shouldn’t just throw myself at you like that.’

‘It’s okay,’ Ron said quickly, his stomach flip-flopping again.

‘It’s just, I haven’t talked to anyone about what happened, you know,’ she said. ‘I can’t talk to my parents, of course. And I didn’t want to burden you and I certainly didn’t want to burden Harry with it.’

Ron said nothing, feeling torn. He couldn’t begin to imagine how Hermione must feel, having nearly been killed. She hadn’t talked about it to him or anyone else in the week that followed, and for a month she had said nothing to her parents. He really ought to help her, he thought. He ought to listen to her if she wanted to talk. But another part of him was still reeling from his last vision. He didn’t want to revisit those memories of that night. He didn’t know if he could handle reliving it, and part of him didn’t understand why girls always seemed to want to TALK about everything.

‘It’s not a burden,’ he heard himself say.

He poured the hot water over the herbs in the pot and let it steep for a few minutes. Hermione had sat down again. He pulled out two mugs from a cupboard, and a tea strainer, and poured out the herbal infusion into the mugs and sat down next to her.

‘I’m a bit of a mess,’ Hermione announced, after taking a tentative sip. ‘I’m not sleeping well. My stupid ribs hurt all the time. I look...ridiculous.’

‘What?’ Ron said. ‘What are you on about?’

‘Oh, come on, Ron,’ Hermione said, with a flash of her old impatience. ‘My hair, my new wardrobe. It’s just not me. And I know why I did it. I must have figured if I looked good on the outside, I’d feel better on the inside.’

‘Oh,’ said Ron, at first not understanding what she meant, and then remembering a phrase that Ginny had used once very recently: shopping therapy. Something, apparently, that only girls did when they were feeling blue.

‘I don’t think you look ridiculous,’ Ron said, feeling his face get hot. You look pretty, even if I liked your hair the old way, he wanted to say, but he didn’t.

Hermione smiled. ‘Well, I feel ridiculous,’ she said. ‘I feel like I should be grateful that I’m alive and mostly okay and I’ve got all my friends in one piece. But then I think...’ Her voice became shaky. ‘I almost lost...you...and Harry. Myself.’

Ron swallowed. It was painful talking about this, and he felt a lump in his throat. He had not wanted to be drawn into this but there he was, thinking again about Hermione lying in hospital, unconscious but looking dead. And Harry, alone and without his godfather and stuck in the same house, yet again, with those horrible Muggles.

‘We’re okay,’ he said, trying to convince himself. ‘I’m fine. You’ll be fine. Harry’ll be fine. We just have to get through this, that’s all. Once school starts we’ll be too busy to dwell on this stuff.’

Hermione smiled tearfully at him and nodded. ‘At least that Umbridge woman won’t be there.’

‘Amen to that,’ said Ron fervently, taking a sip of his tea. ‘Stupid cow. She should be in Azkaban with all those Death Eaters. But at least Harry’ll get to play Quidditch.’

‘No O.W.L.s this year,’ Hermione said.

‘Don’t remind me of those,’ Ron said, relieved that they seemed to be on lighter conversational grounds. ‘I thought we would have heard by now, but...’

‘Maybe with Voldemort being back there were some delays,’ Hermione interjected, and Ron winced as she said the name.

‘Oh, really, Ron WHEN, are you going to just say the name already?’ she asked, sounding exasperated.

Under normal circumstances Ron would have retorted, and their conversation would have devolved into yet another verbal brawl like the hundreds they’d had over the past several years, but tonight Ron was exhausted and worried for her and remembering how soft her hair had felt.

‘I’ll say it,’ he mumbled. ‘You know, when I’m ready.’

Hermione seemed to get the hint and dropped the issue, but not before rolling her eyes and smiling. ‘You’re impossible.’

‘You’re a nag,’ he countered.

‘I am not!’ she protested, looking indignant.

‘Okay, you’re not,’ Ron said, sipping his tea again. Then he muttered under his breath, ‘Nag.’

She swatted him in the shoulder, and they both laughed. This was better, Ron thought. They said nothing to each other for a while and just sipped their tea, occasionally looking at each other and smiling awkwardly, then looking away quickly.

After a half hour of this, Ron finally felt the vestiges of sleep creep up on him. He stood up and collected the mugs and took them to the sink, while Hermione rose, yawned and stretched.

‘That tea is really quite good,’ Hermione said, yawning again, and her eyelids were heavy and sleepy-looking.

‘Yeah,’ Ron agreed. ‘Uh, I guess I’ll turn in.’

‘Me, too.’

They trudged up the stairs, taking care to be quiet, and she paused in front of Ginny’s room.

‘Well,’ she said, and her cheeks looked slightly pink. ‘Good night, then.’ She hugged him very quickly and kissed him on the cheek, lingering there just a moment. Or perhaps it was just Ron’s imagination. His cheek burned.

‘Good night,’ he croaked. She turned and walked slowly into Ginny’s room.

Ron stood there for several moments after Hermione had closed the door, the place on his face where Hermione’s lips had been still tingling.

He became aware that he was standing there like a dumb lump with his mouth open when the door to Fred and George’s room opened and one of them--he was too exhausted to tell which--stumbled out, apparently to use the bathroom.

‘What are you doing?’ the twin asked. Ron determined it was Fred.

‘Nothing,’ Ron said quickly. ‘Just had a cup of tea. Good night.’ And before Fred could come up with another snide remark--he had the amazing ability to do this even when half asleep--Ron hustled up the stairs to his room.

Chapter Four: Harry Comes to The Burrow

Harry arrived a few days later, also with Mr. Weasley.

He was looking rather fit, Ron thought, considering everything he'd been through at the end of term. The Muggles must have heeded Mad-Eye Moody's warning about their treatment of Harry. He was even wearing new clothes instead of his huge cousin's hand-me-downs. A pair of jeans and a polo shirt. His black hair was as untidy as ever and his green eyes had a sad, hollow look to them.

'Hiya, Harry,' Ron said when Harry entered the kitchen with Mr. Weasley. He clapped his best friend on the shoulder.

'Hi, Ron,' Harry said. He smiled.

'Hello, Harry!' said Hermione, in an overly bright voice. She hugged him and kissed him on the cheek, which annoyed Ron for some reason.

Harry greeted everyone in turn before Bill offered to take Harry's trunk upstairs to Ron's room. Ron had--after numerous reminders from his mother--finally gotten around to tidying up his bedroom and making plenty of room for Harry to sleep there on a spare cot.

He helped Harry unpack, neither of them talking; Harry did not seem inclined to talk, so Ron just followed his lead. When all of Harry's clothes had been put away and his trunk tightly stored in Ron's cramped closet, they both stood up.

'So,' Ron said awkwardly. 'How...how was the trip here?'

'Not bad,' Harry said shortly, not looking at Ron. 'Nice car. Your dad's, I mean.'

'Yeah,' said Ron, feeling very uncomfortable. He seized on the only subject that he knew might keep Harry's mind occupied. 'So, uh, fancy a game of Quidditch?'

'Yes,' Harry said, sounding very relieved. 'I'll just change.'

'Right,' Ron said, picking up his Cleansweep and heading downstairs. He went outside to find the twins, Ginny and Hermione all standing there with brooms in hand.

'Oh,' he said, eyeing Hermione. 'You playing?'

'Yes,' she said, a bit defensively. 'I thought I might give it another go.'

'Okay,' Ron said, but he felt a rush of nervousness, remembering how Hermione had fallen from her broom the other day, how she had trembled so violently when he caught her.

'I'm fine,' Hermione said firmly, noticing his worried expression. 'It's like my dad said. You fall off a bike, you get back up and try again.'

‘Fall off a what?’ George asked.

‘A bike,’ Hermione said. ‘A bicycle. You know, a two-wheel--’ She broke off in exasperation, and Ron felt his mood improve immediately. He always got a laugh out of Hermione trying to explain Muggle things to them.

‘Just think of your father’s car, but with two wheels--’

‘We KNOW what a bike is,’ Fred said, in a dramatically overwrought, offended voice. ‘We’re not STUPID.’

‘Well, you could have fooled me!’ Hermione retorted, glaring at him. George whistled, impressed.

‘Ouch, Hermione,’ said Fred, mocking the movement of a knife to the heart. ‘That’s cold, that is.’

‘Hey.’ They turned and saw Harry cross the yard toward them, carrying his Firebolt. Ron gazed at the broom with envy. True, his Cleansweep was a pretty good broom, but nothing compared to Harry’s Firebolt.

‘Hermione, you’re playing?’ said Harry, with a bemused and startled look on his face.

‘Yes,’ she said, even more defensively. ‘Why is everyone so shocked that I’m playing Quidditch?’

‘I dunno,’ Harry said, grinning. Hermione rolled her eyes and mounted her broom and kicked off, rising into the air.

She looked much more confident today than she had earlier in the week, and Ron wondered if she had somehow managed to practice on it when he hadn’t been looking. Then again, confidence didn’t always equal great flying. For all her bravado, Hermione was still looking alternately stiff and wobbly and gripping the broom handle too tightly.

Ron mounted his Cleansweep, and soon everyone was up in the air on broomsticks. Charlie had gone back to Romania, so Bill took his place, keeping goal. Ginny and Harry agreed to alternate as Chaser for their side, and Hermione took Chaser against Ron.

The game commenced. Ron blocked most of Hermione’s scoring attempts, some of them with difficulty. She was in a very different mood today--she was flying aggressively, putting on speed and swerving and banking hard in all directions. She was still flailing about but she didn’t seem to notice; there was a fierce determination on her face, and as the day wore on, her face became covered in a thin sheen of sweat. She’d never be a good flyer but Ron had to admire her gumption all the same.

Harry, meanwhile, flew as magnificently as ever, and Ron felt a rush of envy again. Harry had not flown in almost a year, not since his broom was confiscated by Umbridge after Gryffindor’s first Quidditch match last fall; and he certainly wouldn’t

have been able to practice while staying with the Muggles, but he was still able to fly as though he'd never missed a day. Ron, meanwhile, had been practicing daily and still wasn't as good a flyer. Harry was the natural, Ron thought, with a flash of annoyance, as he swatted at Hermione's Quaffle, knocking it away from the goal hoop.

The game continued for what seemed like several hours, and it was a strangely quiet game, Ron realized. Nobody seemed to be doing much talking, or even cheering. Everyone seemed to be following Harry's lead, who maintained an intense focus on what he was doing and seemed to notice little else.

Finally in the late afternoon Mrs. Weasley bellowed out to them to come eat something, and they called it quits. They were all dusty and sweaty--the day had become very hot--as they entered the house, and Ron knew it would be another battle for the showers. This time, he thought, I don't care if it's icy cold. I'm boiling to death.

He poured himself an enormous glass of what he initially thought was pumpkin juice, but when he looked at it he saw that it was a clear, deep amber liquid.

'What's this?' he asked, looking at it dubiously.

'It's tea, dear,' Mrs. Weasley said brightly. 'Iced tea. The Americans drink it all the time on hot days, I thought I'd try it.'

'Iced tea?' Ron repeated, incredulous.

'I've had it,' said Hermione. 'It's very refreshing.'

'Is there any weird foreign food you HAVEN'T tried?' Ron asked, sniffing at the iced tea in his glass.

Hermione merely smiled, pulling the elastic from her ponytail and letting her damp, sweaty hair fall free. She poured herself a glass of the iced tea and downed it in one, then poured herself another. 'This is lovely, Mrs. Weasley, thanks.'

She picked up another glass and poured one for Harry and handed it to him, which annoyed Ron for some reason. Ron gave one more sniff at the iced tea in his own glass and sipped it.

The tea wasn't bad, but it needed sugar. He got out the sugar bowl and dumped half the contents into his glass and stirred it with a spoon.

'Ron!' Hermione scolded. 'You're going to rot your teeth.'

Ron grinned (Hermione's parents were dentists, apparently a Muggle profession that dealt with teeth). 'Well, I'll just call your Mum or Dad and have them fix them.'

Hermione rolled her eyes.

‘I’m going to have a shower,’ Ginny announced, bounding up the stairs.

‘Don’t use all the hot water!’ Fred bellowed at her. She waved at him and disappeared up the stairs. ‘Girls,’ Fred went on. ‘I swear she spends more time in that bathroom primping than anyone I’ve ever met. What is it about girls and bathrooms?’

Hermione exchanged looks with Harry and Ron, all thinking about Moaning Myrtle, still haunting the second floor girls’ bathroom at Hogwarts.

‘So, Hermione,’ said George conversationally, screwing up his face at his iced tea and following Ron’s example of adding copious amounts of sugar to it, ‘you’re not bad at Quidditch, you know.’

‘You’re really not bad,’ Harry said.

‘You ought to try out for the team, actually. We need two Chasers this year,’ Ron said, without thinking.

Hermione’s cheeks, already brown from the sun, flushed pink. Ron’s stomach flip-flopped again, and he took a big gulp of tea but missed, spilling half of it down his front. Fred and George sniggered at him, and he gave them a withering look.

‘I never thought I’d see Hermione play Quidditch,’ Harry was saying, with arched eyebrows. ‘I thought Quidditch was just a silly game.’

‘Well, it IS just a game,’ Hermione said defensively. ‘I mean, it’s fun of course, but it’s hardly the greatest thing in the world, is it?’

Fred, George, Harry and Ron all exchanged looks.

‘Put it to you this way, Hermione,’ George said. ‘There are two great things in this life.’

‘Three things,’ Fred corrected.

‘No, four,’ George corrected. ‘One is eating. Two is sleeping. Three is Quidditch. And four...oi, how do I explain four?’

Fred had a devilish grin on his face. ‘Let’s just say that without number four nobody would be around to do one, two and three.’

‘And I might also add, by the way,’ said George, ‘that number four is more often than not number one, followed by Quidditch.’

‘Although Quidditch can be number one on occasion,’ said Fred. ‘But if it happens that Quidditch is number one, it usually means you’re not getting any of number four. Actually, that’s true of everything else besides number four.’

‘Right,’ said George. ‘So basically, number four is always number one in terms of priorities, but sometimes in reality it becomes number two or number three--’

‘Or, sadly, even number four,’ finished Fred.

‘What the hell are you two talking about?’ Ron asked, exasperated.

‘Yeah,’ said Harry, annoyed.

‘Obviously these two have never had number four,’ George said, nodding at Fred and smirking.

‘Oh, please,’ said Hermione, rolling her eyes. ‘I know what you’re talking about, and you’re pigs, both of you.’

‘Ouch, Hermione,’ said Fred, laughing. ‘Give us a break, now. All men are pigs from time to time, aren’t they?’

‘Harry and Ron aren’t,’ Hermione said indignantly.

George gave a derisive snort. ‘Trust me,’ he said, ‘they are.’

Ron felt his face go hot; he had just worked out what ‘number four’ meant. Sex, of course. His eyes caught Harry’s, who was also blushing, and Ron guessed that Harry had figured it out, too. Hermione looked at both of them and threw up her hands in disgust.

‘Boys,’ she muttered.

‘Men,’ Fred corrected, throwing a wicked glance at Ron and Harry. ‘Well, maybe not in Ron’s case.’ Fred ran his fingers along his very scratchy face, which he had not bothered to shave today, and shot Ron a smug smile.

‘Shut up,’ Ron snapped.

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The next few weeks passed rather quickly. The days fell into a very predictable routine, but nobody seemed all that desirous to break it.

In the mornings they ate the hearty breakfasts Mrs. Weasley cooked, then helped her with the dishes and with a little cleaning up around the house. In the afternoons they played Quidditch. In the evenings they ate dinner, shared some polite and occasionally amusing conversation that always had a pall of strain over it, and all of them went to bed early.

Harry had been particularly terse, barely saying a word unless absolutely necessary. As Ron had expected, Hermione immediately began to pester him about talking to Harry, telling Ron that it wasn’t healthy for Harry to go round bottling up his feelings. Ron countered that it wasn’t his place to pressure Harry to talk about something he, Harry, didn’t appear keen to discuss, and that Harry ought to be the one to bring up Sirius or anything else, not Ron or Hermione. Hermione shot back that maybe Harry DID want to talk about it, but wanted one of them to make the first move. And back

and forth it went, with Ron finally insisting that Hermione drop it or he'd stop speaking to her altogether. She did, but now she had taken to giving Ron murderous looks at mealtimes and during Quidditch matches, and she played harder than ever, hurling the Quaffle not so much to score goals but, Ron thought, to hit him with it.

Ten days before the summer holidays ended, Ron went down to breakfast to find Harry sitting at the table between Ginny and Hermione. Ginny's long red hair was messy and loose, but Hermione had hers in a long braid. She looked refreshed and awake, and she smiled at him.

'Good morning, Ron,' she said brightly. What was she so cheerful about? he wondered sourly. He had not slept well last night, he realized.

'Morning,' he answered. Hermione's smile faded a bit. She swallowed and poured herself some pumpkin juice for herself, then took Harry's glass and filled it, and for some reason this annoyed Ron immensely. He strode around the table and sat next to Ginny.

Breakfast was hurried this morning, in part because Fred and George announced they were leaving to open up the shop for the day. Just as they got up from the table to go change, a large screech owl hooted and soared into the kitchen, a small bag attached to its leg.

'Got it, Mum,' Ron said through a mouthful of toast. He untied the bag from the owl's leg, removed the letters inside, and re-attached the bag, with a Knut inside, to the owl's leg. It hooted once, and took off again.

'What is it dear?'

Ron gulped. "Uh, Hogwarts letters," he said, feeling his face get hot. 'And...uh, O.W.L. results, looks like.'

'Well, it's about time!' Mrs. Weasley said. 'I thought they'd never get back to us.'

Hermione stood up from the table like a shot, nearly knocking over her pumpkin juice.

'Oh!' she cried. 'I forgot about those!'

'YOU forgot about O.W.L. results?' Harry asked, smirking, and then he smiled at her. Hermione smiled back at him sheepishly. Ron scowled.

'Well, let's see,' said Mrs. Weasley. She took the letters from Ron and passed them out to Harry, Ginny, Hermione and finally back to Ron. Hermione and Ginny tore theirs open hurriedly. For Ginny there would be nothing more than a booklist.

Hermione looked positively petrified of her envelope. Her face was white as she tore it open and pulled several pieces of parchment from it. A red and gold prefects' badge was tucked inside the envelope as well.

‘Prefect again,’ she said, but her voice was tight and she didn’t seem to care about it. She put the badge down and unfolded the parchment, and her eyes scanned it rapidly. As they did, the color slowly returned to her cheeks.

‘Well?’

‘Mum and Dad will be happy,’ she said, looking very relieved.

‘What’d you get?’ Harry asked. His own letters were in his hand, unopened.

‘O’s in everything,’ Hermione said, blushing slightly and trying to sound modest. ‘Twelve in all.’

‘Wow,’ said Harry and Ron together, both very impressed.

‘Hermione, that’s...that’s incredible!’ Mrs. Weasley said happily, hugging her. ‘Your parents will be beside themselves, they’ll be so proud. And prefect again!’

‘You’re a lock for Head Girl at this point,’ Harry pointed out, beaming at her. She smiled back, and Ron scowled. I wish they’d stop doing that, he thought irritably.

‘Harry’ Mrs. Weasley asked. Apparently she was saving Ron for last.

‘Okay,’ said Harry, looking slightly pale as he opened his letter. He scanned it for a moment, then announced. ‘Uh, A in...Divination. A in Astronomy. O in Potions...no way! McGonagall must have--well, never mind. A in History of Magic. O in Care of Magical Creatures. E in Transfiguration. E in Herbology. E in Charms. And... O in Defence Against the Dark Arts.’

‘That’s wonderful, Harry,’ said Mrs. Weasley, hugging him as well.

‘Thanks,’ said Harry. ‘Although I wouldn’t have done half as well without Hermione’s help.’

He grinned at her, and she beamed back at him, and Ron scowled again.

‘Well, Ronnie, your turn.’

‘Uh, right,” said Ron, and he opened up his letter. A red and gold prefect badge fell from it and he caught it.

‘Oh, good, prefect again!’ said Mrs. Weasley, pleased. Ron let out a breath he wasn’t aware of holding. Well, he thought, my marks can’t be that bad if I got prefect again.

He looked over his scores. ‘Lessee,’ he said nervously. ‘A in Herbology, E in Transfiguration and Care of Magical Creatures. A in Divination. O in Defence Against the Dark Arts. Cool! A in History of Magic. A in Astronomy. E in Charms. And...O...in Potions. That can’t be right--well. I guess, uh, that’s good.’ Ron blinked. This couldn’t be right. He never expected his marks to be this good. He read the results again and swallowed. McGonagall MUST have said or done something,

because there was no other explanation for how he'd pulled an O in Potions. He'd worked very hard (harder than anyone knew) for his O.W.Ls but he never thought he'd do better than an A in Potions, at best.

'Those are very good marks, Ron!' Mrs. Weasley said happily. 'You'll have to study very hard for your N.E.W.Ts, though, you know. Those are really important for your future careers.'

Ron nodded, reading over his scores again, not quite convinced they were his. Maybe he had what it took to be an Auror after all. He glanced at Harry, who was thinking the same thing, and they grinned. Then Ron looked at Hermione. He knew that half the reason he'd done so well was because of Hermione's help last year. He looked up and gave her a grateful smile, and she smiled back. He felt a light flip-flop in his stomach and forgot all about everything else.

'Okay, give me your book lists,' Mrs. Weasley said. 'Just think, Ginny, it's your year for O.W.L.s!'

'Yeah, great,' said Ginny unenthusiastically, handing over her booklist. 'I can hardly wait.'

Mrs. Weasley kissed them all, pulled out her wand, announced 'I'm off, be back later!' and with a loud CRACK she Disapparated.

'Well, that's over,' said Hermione, looking very relieved. 'Both of you did very well.'

'Better than you thought, you mean?' Harry said wryly.

'We wouldn't have done so well without all your help,' Ron said sincerely.

'Maybe this year you'll start taking your own notes in History of Magic, then?' Hermione said, crossing her arms.

'Do we have to?' Ron asked, smiling, and she rolled her eyes, but her lip was upturned in a grin.

'I wonder who the new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher will be,' Ginny said.

'Whoever it is, he or she can't be any worse than that Umbridge troll,' Ron said darkly.

'Unless it's Snape,' Harry pointed out. 'Then again, maybe Dumbledore should just let Snape have the job, seeing it's jinxed. Then we wouldn't have to deal with him in seventh year.'

'Harry,' Hermione said in a warning voice, 'Dumbledore--'

'Trusts Snape,' Harry finished, his voice hard. 'Yeah, I KNOW, all right? You've told me a thousand times.'

‘Harry, there’s no need to--’ Hermione began.

‘Has it ever occurred to you, Hermione,’ Harry interrupted, his voice rising, ‘that maybe Dumbledore isn’t perfect? That maybe the old goat makes mistakes from time to time?’

‘Harry!’ Hermione looked shocked.

‘What?’ Harry shot back, glowering at all of them. ‘I’m not allowed to say that the great Dumbledore is less than perfect? Because he’s not perfect. He’s not perfect, my dad wasn’t perfect, Sirius wasn’t perfect, and god knows I’m not perfect. Maybe if I’d just listened to you last year...’ His voice trailed off and he turned away.

Hermione bit her lip, her eyes filling with tears. Ginny glanced at Ron with a sad expression on her face. She and Hermione both moved closer to Harry, who was standing very still and looking resolutely to the floor. Ron’s feet felt like lead—he knew he should try and comfort Harry but somehow, he just couldn’t move. He just couldn’t bring himself to confront Harry with the terrible events of last term.

‘Harry, it’s not your fault,’ Hermione said in a very small voice.

‘Yeah, I’m sure you tell yourselves that constantly,’ Harry said bitterly, his voice cracking.

‘It’s not!’ Hermione said fiercely. ‘Voldemort tricked you. You didn’t force us to come with you.’

‘Yeah, well, maybe you should rethink hanging around me, if it’s going to make you do stupid things like follow me into a room full of Death Eaters,’ Harry said glumly, running a hand through his untidy black hair.

‘Stop it!’ Hermione said shrilly. ‘Don’t you dare say something like that! You’re not going to push us away or get rid of us. Ron and me, and Ginny, too, we’re not going anywhere. If you don’t like it, that’s just too bad. But you can’t face what’s coming by yourself and you had better stop thinking you can. You have to stop--’

‘Playing the hero?’ Harry asked sadly, looking up at her, but there was no trace of anger in his voice now. Ron swallowed and felt a horrible weight in his chest. He had never seen Harry look so defeated. He made a move toward Harry, thinking to put a hand on his shoulder, but Hermione moved in first.

Tears streaming down her face, she put her arms around Harry’s shoulders and hugged him tightly. Harry’s arms hung limply by his sides for a moment, and then he buried his face in her hair and put his arms around her. Ron knew he was struggling not to cry.

Watching them, Ron felt a hollow ache start in his chest and spread to his stomach. He wasn’t sure why seeing them like this felt painful. He only knew that he suddenly could not watch them anymore. He caught Ginny’s eye.

‘I’ll just...make tea,’ he said lamely, heading for the stove.

‘I’ll help,’ Ginny offered, and followed him away from Harry and Hermione, who stood still as statues, hugging in the middle of the kitchen.

## *Chapter Five: The Head Boy and the Dark Arts Teacher*

The morning of September the first was, as usual, entirely chaotic. Even though only four of them were left to go to King’s Cross to catch the Hogwarts’ Express, they had still managed not to get enough packing done the night before and to oversleep the next day.

‘HURRY UP, YOU LOT!’ Mrs. Weasley shrieked at them. Ron and Harry were hurling their clothes and books into their trunks, ignoring the hooting of Pigwidgeon and Hedwig. They each balled up their school robes and put them on top and closed them.

Or at least, Harry did. Ron’s trunk, which was smaller than Harry’s and much older, would not close properly. Ron wound up having to sit on it to get the latch to click into place, but on the way downstairs it burst open and half his things came flying out.

‘Shit!’ Ron yelled. ‘Bloody--’

‘Ronald Weasley, watch your language!’ Mrs. Weasley snapped angrily. ‘Oh, for heaven’s sake,’ she added, eyeing Ron’s spilling trunk. She pulled her wand from the waistband of her skirt and cried ‘Pack!’ Everything folded itself neatly and fit easily inside. She shut the trunk, waved her wand again and said ‘*Reparo*’ and the lock fixed itself.

‘Now move it!’ she bellowed, and Ron and Harry finished clumping down the stairs, dragging their trunks in one hand and carrying their owl cages in the other.

Mr. Weasley was waiting by the car impatiently. They threw their trunks into the boot of the car. Hermione and Ginny came rushing outside, panicked-looking and flushed. Hermione’s hair was tangled and uncombed and she had buttoned her blouse crookedly.

They all climbed into the car, which expanded on the inside to easily accommodate them and their pet cages, and Mr. Weasley peeled out of the driveway, ignoring the appalled looks of his wife as he tore away from the burrow and out onto the main road toward London.

The trip took a lot less time than it would have in a Muggle car, at least according to Hermione.

‘Incredible,’ Mr. Weasley said, shaking his head and taking a particularly sharp turn very fast. Everyone lurched to one side of the car and grunted in pain.

‘Ow!’ Ron snapped. ‘Bloody hell!’ Everyone had slammed into Ron.

‘Ron, don’t swear!’ said Hermione and Mrs. Weasley together, and Harry and Ginny laughed.

‘How Muggles travel without magic, it’s remarkable,’ Mr. Weasley remarked.

They pulled into King’s Cross station and parked (Hermione told Ron that were they in a Muggle car they’d never find parking, because Muggle cars couldn’t magically squeeze between other cars as Mr. Weasley’s had just done), then piled out of the car in a frenzy of trunks and cages. Mr. Weasley fetched luggage carts and they all ran full-tilt toward the barrier between platforms 9 and 10.

Ron and Ginny quickly kissed their mother good-bye, hugged their father, and ploughed through the barrier and onto Platform 9 & 3/4, followed at once by Harry and Hermione.

The train whistle sounded and they hurtled toward the doors, piling on just in time as the train lurched out of the station. They barely had time to look out the window to see Mr. and Mrs. Weasley--who had just entered the platform--wave goodbye to them.

‘Let’s find a compartment,’ Ginny said quickly, nodding to Harry.

‘Right,’ he said, following her and dragging his trunk.

‘I guess we’d better go to the prefects’ car again,’ Ron said, wishing he didn’t have to bother with that.

‘Oh!’ said Hermione, sounding panicked. ‘I have to change!’

‘It’s all right, don’t get hysterical,’ Ron said, smiling. ‘Let’s find a couple of cubicles.’

Ron and Hermione located two loos and shut themselves in. Ron barely managed to fit inside with his trunk and Pigwidgeon’s cage, let alone find the room to change out of his jeans and t-shirt into his Hogwarts’ uniform. He gave up on trying to pull on his robes inside the loo and exited just in time to see Hermione exit her cubicle. She had somehow managed to get her robes on over her uniform, and had brushed her hair and pulled part of it back into a clip. Self-consciously Ron ran a hand through his hair, which was at least long enough to lie flat these days.

They dragged their trunks up to the front of the train, and Ron stopped to pull on his robes and attach his prefect’s badge to his chest. They set their trunks aside and entered the coach.

The other prefects were already there. Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson, the Slytherin prefects, both looked up and glared at them, but said nothing. Ernie MacMillan and Hannah Abbott, the Hufflepuff prefects, and Anthony Goldstein and Padma Patil, the Ravenclaw prefects, all said friendly hellos. Ron smiled back and sat down next to Hermione, whose cheeks were slightly pink with anticipation.

Malfoy had just opened his mouth to say something (no doubt something very rude) when the door to the coach opened again and the Head Boy and Head Girl entered. Ron's jaw dropped when he saw that the Head Girl was none other than Katie Bell, the Gryffindor Chaser. The Head Boy was someone Ron did not recognize at first, but his badge showed that he was in Ravenclaw. He was a tall, muscular boy with thick, sandy brown hair, silver-blue eyes and a square, firm jaw. He smiled at them all, his eyes coming to rest on Hermione, who blushed and smiled back shyly. Ron felt his stomach clench in annoyance.

'Hi, Ron, Hermione!' Katie said excitedly. 'Pretty amazing, eh? I couldn't believe it when I got the letter.'

'Congratulations, Katie!' said Hermione, standing up and hugging her. Malfoy and Pansy both scowled.

'This is Eddie,' Katie said, introducing the handsome Ravenclaw boy to Hermione. 'Eddie Carmichael.'

'Hello,' Hermione said, her voice suddenly fluttery. Ron's stomach clenched even harder. Now he remembered Eddie Carmichael clearly--he was the boy who had offered to sell him and Harry a batch of Barruffio's Brain Elixir last year.

'Nice to meet you,' Eddie said, in the kind of smooth, lazy voice that caused Padma and Hannah to both smile simperingly. Ron was liking Eddie less and less by the second. 'I've heard you're the most brilliant student at Hogwarts, Hermione, but nobody said you were also one of the prettiest.'

Padma and Hannah both giggled, and Hermione blushed as Eddie took her hand and shook it delicately. Ron rolled his eyes in disgust.

Eddie and Katie went around the coach introducing themselves, Eddie practically ignoring the boys and making flirtatious comments to all the girls, even Pansy Parkinson (whom Ron thought looked like a cross between a pug and a thin cow). In a matter of minutes all the girls--including Katie--were gazing at him with a kind of rapt adoration. Ron was now thoroughly disgruntled. Did girls ALWAYS turn into silly idiots in the presence of a bloke who happened to be good-looking? He looked at the other boys in the room and noticed that all of them--with the exception of Malfoy, who was staring resolutely out the window--were glaring at Eddie.

Honestly, Ron thought, as Eddie sat down gracefully in his seat. There are a lot of pretty girls here and none of us blokes are acting ridiculous. Ron stole a glance at Hermione, who smiled back at him, and he slipped halfway out of his seat.

'So, you all pretty much know the drill,' said Eddie in that smooth voice, and Ron, as he straightened himself in his seat, was reminded unpleasantly of Gilderoy Lockhart. 'The only new things this year, unfortunately, involve more babysitting duties.'

'We have to escort the third years around Hogsmeade,' Katie announced glumly, brushing a strand of dark blonde hair out of her eyes. 'What with...You-Know-Who being out and about.'

Malfoy snorted derisively and shot Katie a very dirty look, but said nothing.

‘Right,’ said Eddie, glowering at Malfoy (well, Ron thought, at least he knows Malfoy’s a prat). ‘The other thing that’s going to happen is we’re going to have regular meetings, just to keep everyone informed. The headmaster’s really keen on increasing interhouse unity this year and he wants the prefects and Katie and me here to set the example, so we’ll have monthly meetings and be in charge of planning social events.’

‘That sounds nice,’ Hannah said, sounding pleased, and Padma nodded.

‘I guess,’ said Ernie doubtfully. ‘At least we don’t have O.W.L.s this year to worry about.’

‘Well,’ said Katie, sounding a bit nervous, ‘Dumbledore wants us to help the fifth years with that, too.’

‘What?’ Ron spluttered, now outraged.

‘That’s not fair!’ Anthony Goldstein protested. ‘Nobody helped us last year on our O.W.L.s! We had to prepare on our own.’

‘And what about those of us who, I don’t know, have a life?’ Ron said angrily. ‘I’m on the Quidditch team--’ At this Malfoy gave another derisive snort, ‘--and so is Ratboy, I mean, MALFOY over there, and Katie, and we’ve got practice to worry about.’ Malfoy shot him a murderous look.

‘I know, I know,’ said Eddie, standing up and putting out placating hands. ‘Believe me, when I found out just how much work was going to go into being Head Boy this year, I almost turned in my badge.’ He smiled silkily and Ron knew for a fact that Eddie had never considered any such thing. ‘But don’t worry, the headmaster assures Katie and me that there will be plenty of time for extracurricular activities.’

At this, Ron felt his face burn. Quidditch, an ‘extracurricular’ activity? Even Katie, who had up to then been giving Eddie the same sighing looks as Padma and Hannah, looked affronted. Malfoy glowered at the Head Boy.

‘So, that’s it,’ Eddie announced, clapping his hands together, and this gesture made Ron want to pummel him. ‘Nothing new to do on the train, just patrol every now and again like you did before. See you at the Feast.’

He smiled and ushered everyone out. Ron went first, dying to get out of the coach before he punched Eddie, Malfoy or both of them. He turned to see the other boys filing out behind him, all of them looking at Eddie with barely concealed dislike. Malfoy apparently decided he hated Eddie so much that he didn’t even stop to shove Ron, taunt him or give him a dirty look.

The girls came out next, and to a one Eddie shook their hands, smiling at them flirtatiously. Hermione was last and Eddie gave her his most dazzling smile and--to Ron’s absolute horror and fury--kissed her hand. She blushed and looked down,

which made Ron want to kick something, and then Eddie rather blatantly looked her up and down, appraising her.

She's not a piece of meat, you slimy git! Ron thought vividly, and this time he did kick something: his trunk. He was just biting his lip against the pain that shot up his big toe when Hermione exited the coach, looking pink-cheeked and excited. Ron almost kicked his trunk again.

'Ron, are you all right?' she asked, noticing his very rigid expression.

'Fine,' Ron said through gritted teeth, and he picked up his trunk and Pigwidgeon's cage and started thumping toward the back of the train.

'Well, I'm very excited for Katie,' Hermione said, her voice annoyingly cheerful. 'I never knew she was such a good student. Eddie Carmichael is a real surprise, though. Remember last year, he tried to sell you and Harry Barruffio's Brain Elixir? That's almost as bad as Fred and George selling Canary Creams to the first years! Still, I suppose he must have excellent marks to make Head Boy. And he seems very nice.'

'Yeah,' Ron said shortly. 'He's nice, all right. A real charmer, that Eddie.'

'Oh, really,' said Hermione, catching his tone and sounding exasperated herself. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Well, I was just wondering why it is that every time a HANDSOME bloke'--Ron said the word 'handsome' as though it were the most revolting thing in the world--'is around, girls lose fifty PQ points and act like idiots.'

'It's IQ points,' Hermione corrected hotly, 'and we did NOT act like idiots!'

'You could have fooled me,' he snapped.

'Oh, like you've never acted stupid around a girl before!' Hermione shot back. 'Like you wouldn't act like a complete fool if Fleur Delacour floated past you right now!'

'Fleur is Bill's girlfriend,' Ron said through gritted teeth, 'and for your information I saw her over the summer and you'll be glad to know I barely even looked at her. And I certainly never ogled her the way Eddie just ogled you. Like he was...'

'Like he was what?'

'Like he was imagining what...what you look like...sunbathing naked or something!' Ron blurted out, his face turning red.

'Ron!' Hermione cried, shocked. 'Where do you...where on earth do you get that idea? That's...that's just...'

'I'm a bloke, aren't I?' Ron snapped. 'I know how blokes think!'

'Because you were thinking it!' Hermione accused, her face flushed.

‘No!’ Ron lied, his face turning even redder. He looked away.

‘Fine,’ said Hermione, sounding very annoyed. ‘I don’t know why you have to get all worked up just because a boy is nice to me. And I wasn’t acting silly!’

‘No, you were acting stupid,’ Ron snapped, his anger returning full-force.

‘No more stupid than you acted around Fleur.’

‘We’re back to her?’

‘You couldn’t even SPEAK when you were around her!’

‘Well, at least I don’t write her love letters all the time!’ Ron shouted, and this time he stopped walking, dropped his trunk with a thud and whirled on her.

‘You’re talking about Viktor,’ Hermione said angrily.

‘Why, yes, I am talking about VICKY,’ said Ron furiously, and only then it occurred to him that he really didn’t know why he was losing his temper with her. ‘I hardly heard from you at all this summer. Maybe it was because writing Vicky was taking up all your time.’

‘That’s not true!’ said Hermione heatedly, the color rising in her cheeks, her eyes glittering. ‘I only wrote him a few times! And his name is Viktor!’

‘But you did write to him!’ Ron said accusingly. ‘What was all that stuff about how you had nobody to talk to all summer, huh? Did you spill your guts to Vicky? Is that why you didn’t want to write to me?’

‘I told you I didn’t want to burden you!’ she shouted, her voice now high and shrill, and a few students had peeked out of their compartments to stare at them.

‘Why, because you didn’t think I could handle it?’ Ron snapped, now completely irate with her and still not knowing quite why. More students were watching them.

‘No! What is WRONG with you?’

‘I thought we were friends, Hermione,’ Ron said, now very close to her and towering over her. ‘I mean, the whole summer I worried about you and wondered where the hell you were and how you were doing and you never once wrote to tell me anything. Just some stupid postcard from Italy with three words on it!’

The words came out in a rush before he knew what he was saying, but just as they started to register in his brain he saw Hermione’s eyes fill with tears.

His anger vanished in a rush, replaced by a horrible guilt and the humiliation of knowing that a lot of students had just witnessed their row.

‘Oh, no,’ he said quickly, taking a step toward her and putting an arm around her. ‘Don’t cry, Hermione. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it.’

But Hermione pushed him away and gave him a very angry look.

‘I’m going to find Harry and Ginny,’ she snapped.

She wiped at her eyes with her sleeve, yanked up her trunk and Crookshanks’ crate and dragged them resolutely toward the back of the train, not looking back. Ron stared after her, feeling his insides deflate like a giant balloon.

A year ago she would never have stopped arguing with him; she would have kept going just to get the last word in (which she usually did). She might have cried but she never would have just walked away like that. Somehow that, more than the row itself, left Ron feeling utterly woebegone.

The dozen or so students--most of them first years, by the look of them--continued to stare open-mouthed and wide-eyed at him for several seconds before he realized they were there.

‘Clear off, you lot!’ he snarled at them. He pointed to his prefect’s badge and the first years all let out a collective yelp and jumped back into their compartments.

Ron picked up his trunk-his big toe was still throbbing from having kicked it-and Pigwidgeon’s cage and stumped off in the direction Hermione had gone, feeling that this was perhaps the worst start to any school year than he could remember.

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Ron had never spent such an awkward, tension-filled journey to Hogwarts with his friends as the one he’d just completed. Hermione had not said even two words to him since their blazing row in the corridor on the train. Harry seemed to have understood from the moment they entered their compartment that they had just fought, and said nothing about it. Ginny made a valiant attempt at conversation, mostly engaging Neville Longbottom, but then left to join Dean Thomas in another compartment. Luna Lovegood did not join them for this trip, for which Ron was grateful. He liked Neville very much but Luna gave him the creeps, and it was difficult enough sitting in the compartment with nearly everyone who’d been in that horrific battle last term. Knowing Luna she might have started talking about it in her weird, dreamy way.

Hagrid was at the station to collect the first years, and for this Ron was extremely grateful. Hagrid’s presence had always been a comforting one. Then Ron remembered that Hagrid had brought back his half-brother--a fully grown giant--and was hiding him in the Forbidden Forest somewhere, and suddenly Hagrid’s presence was not so comforting. Ron wondered if Hagrid would ever figure out that certain creatures really were very dangerous. Hagrid waved to him, Harry and Hermione--not noticing that Hermione wasn’t speaking to Ron--and ushered the first years off toward the boats that carried them across the lake to the castle.

Hermione's silent treatment continued as they entered the Great Hall for the Sorting Ceremony. She sat resolutely away from him, between Ginny and Neville, and seemed to look at everyone and everywhere except at him. Ron sat next to Harry, feeling very glum.

'What's up?' Harry asked, glancing at Ron and then Hermione.

'I'll tell you later,' Ron said dully, sighing. Then Neville elbowed him hard in the ribs. 'Ron!' he said, his voice sounding excited. 'Look up at the staff table. Isn't that--'

'Bill?' interrupted Harry, and Ron's head shot up and around. He felt his jaw drop and his stomach plummet. His oldest brother Bill was sitting at the staff table, between Professor Snape and Professor Sinistra. He was wearing robes Ron had never seen before--deep midnight blue and very plain, and his hair was pulled back into its neat ponytail.

'What the HELL is Bill doing up there?' Ron hissed, remembering at least to keep his voice down.

'Ron!' Ginny squeaked, now standing behind him and leaning over. 'Look where he's sitting! D'you think--'

'No WAY,' said Harry, completely flummoxed.

'Hey, Weasley!' a drawling voice called. Ron, Harry, Ginny and Hermione whirled around to see Draco Malfoy, sitting between his two huge cronies Crabbe and Goyle (who looked, if possible, even more vast than last year). 'Looks like your brother's the new Dark Arts teacher. Better hope he doesn't wind up like the last five of them!' And Malfoy let out an uproarious laugh.

Ron started to get up.

'Don't!' a female voice said, and he turned to see Hermione, looking up at him and gripping his arm very tightly. She had moved over and was now sitting beside him, looking up at him, her brown eyes worried. 'Don't get into it with him here.' He sat down slowly, eyeing her.

'So you're talking to me now?' Ron said coolly.

'No,' she said quickly, turning away from him.

Damn, Ron thought. He was just about to plead to Hermione when the doors to the Great Hall opened, and Professor McGonagall strode in, followed by a crowd of very small, very scared-looking first years. It was time for the Sorting Ceremony. Ron slumped in his seat. He hated sitting through this part.

The Sorting Hat sang the same song it had sung last year, warning the students about rivalries and divisions between the houses, and the sorting began in earnest. Ron knew he ought to be paying attention--the first years would be his and Hermione's responsibility once the Start of Term feast was over--but his heart just wasn't in it. By

the time 'Young, Laura' had been sorted into Hufflepuff, Ron realized as he looked at the new faces at the Gryffindor table that he didn't remember any one of their names.

Dumbledore, who had entered the room without Ron even noticing, stood up slowly and cleared his throat. Ron couldn't be sure, but Dumbledore seemed to look older than he had previously.

'Welcome back, students, to another year, and welcome to our newest arrivals,' he said, his voice flintier than usual. 'I will not bore you with any speeches now. Tuck in!'

The food appeared magically on the tables, plates of roast beef and chicken, potatoes and green beans, baked apples and breads. Ron looked at the food and found for the first time in his life that he had no appetite at all for a Hogwarts feast. He was miserable over his fight with Hermione, but when he glanced up at the staff table and saw his oldest brother engaged in spirited conversation with Professor Sinistra, he immediately forgot all about his fight with her and focused on just why Bill should be here at all.

'Ron, did you know about this?' Harry asked, still staring up at Bill.

'No,' Ron said, shaking his head in amazement. 'No idea. Ginny?'

'No,' she said, having taken a seat next to Ron. 'Why didn't he tell us? Why didn't Mum and Dad tell us?'

'Maybe it was a last minute thing,' Harry suggested. 'Not like most people are going around clamouring for the job, are they?'

'Yeah, but BILL?' Ron said incredulously. 'Bill's really good at that defensive stuff, don't get me wrong. You'd have to be to be a Curse Breaker for the goblins. But what the hell is he on about? Doesn't he know the Dark Arts job is jinxed?'

'He'd better tell us what the hell is going on,' Ginny said, looking angry. Ron and Harry looked shocked to hear her curse.

'How WEIRD is that going to be, having your older brother teaching you lessons?' Harry said, shaking his head.

'Bollocks,' Ron said, feeling suddenly very testy. The first day of term had thus far been miserable, and learning that his oldest brother was about to become his teacher only capped things. The only positive thing was that he was so angry, his appetite seemed to return. He dished himself up huge mounds of food and began to eat, scowling all the while.

But the food went sour in his mouth when he glanced at Hermione. She was still resolutely not looking at him, but was talking to Neville. Or rather, Neville was talking and she was listening, except that she didn't seem to be listening. She looked strange, almost sad. Ron felt the potatoes he'd just eaten sink into his stomach like a lead weight.

For the first time he was bitterly aware of not talking to Hermione. They'd had plenty of rows in the past and had gone for long stretches without speaking, but somehow this was different. Ron had made Hermione cry--something he had not done in ages--and she had just crumbled, somehow. If she'd just lashed out at him, maybe he wouldn't feel so awful inside.

The chattering went on for a while, but Ron, Harry and Ginny did not speak. They gave only cursory waves to Seamus Finnegan, Dean Thomas, Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown. Pudding appeared, but Ron couldn't even manage a bit of strawberry tart. He was just beginning to wonder whether the stupid feast would ever end, when Dumbledore stood up again.

'I have some announcements. Once again Mr. Filch is insisting that all students read any and all new notices on his office door; by now most of you should know where that is. The Forest is, as usual, completely, totally and utterly out of bounds to all students.' His eyes flickered over to the Gryffindor table. 'That's it. Sleep well, rest up. Tomorrow is a busy day.'

Ron did manage to remember that he and Hermione had to lead the first years to Gryffindor Tower. He followed her out of the Great Hall, motioning to the first years to fall in behind. Hermione said nothing to him, but merely told the first years in brisk tones, 'This way. Keep up.'

They reached the portrait hole and Ron realized he had never learned the password. Hermione said crisply, 'Fainting Fancies,' and the portrait of the fat lady swung open.

The usual celebratory, impromptu party in the common room was in relatively full swing. Ron was slightly amused to see that many of the older students were showing off recent purchases from Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, Fred and George's joke shop in Diagon Alley, but the moment faded and he was quickly miserable again. He was also exhausted, and wanted nothing more than to go to bed.

He let Hermione give the first years their opening speech and let her expound on the rules (she was better at following them anyway), and at the first opportunity he slunk upstairs to his room. Harry was already there, sitting quietly in the window and staring out the window, absently stroking Hedwig's feathers.

'Hey,' Ron said, his voice scratchy.

'Hey,' said Harry, not turning around. 'You and Hermione have another argument?'

'Yeah,' said Ron dully.

'Well, at least that's back to normal,' Harry said, but there was no humor in his voice.

'It was bad,' Ron said, pulling off his robes and tossing them carelessly on his desk chair. 'I...I made her cry.'

Harry said nothing for a moment.

‘What did you say to make her do that?’ Harry asked, but he did not sound accusatory, for which Ron was grateful.

‘I don’t know!’ Ron said miserably. ‘We’d just come out of meeting with the Head Boy and Girl. You know Katie’s Head Girl? Anyway, the Head Boy is this ridiculous pretty boy, Eddie Carmichael,” Ron spat out the name as though it were stinksap, “and he was all over Hermione, drooling all over her head. And she was just eating it up! When’s Hermione going to get a clue?’

‘Hermione needs a clue?’ Harry said, smiling wryly and looking at him.

‘Yes!’ Ron said angrily, now pacing. ‘You should have seen this bloke, Harry. A dirty great prat he was. I can tell you this much, he wasn’t slobbering all over Hermione because she’s the smartest girl in school.’

Harry smiled and shook his head.

‘What?’ Ron said, now feeling thoroughly annoyed.

‘Then let me guess,’ Harry said, tapping his glasses in mock-thoughtfulness. ‘Somehow the subject of Krum came up and you got all shirty with her about that, too.’

‘Yeah, well, Krum’s no different, is he?’ Ron said, his voice rising. ‘Pen pal, my arse. He’s way too old for her! And for pete’s sake, he can’t even say her name proper. Herm-own-ninny. Are you kidding? And then, then she accuses ME of acting like a git around pretty girls. Well, excuse me. I mean, she’s gotten really pretty if you haven’t noticed and you don’t see me going around acting like I don’t have two brain cells to rub together, do you? I’m not salivating all over Hermione like I’m some dog or acting like a complete moron!’

‘Oh, no, definitely not,’ said Harry, in a tone that made Ron wonder if Harry was being entirely serious. And Ron could swear he saw Harry trying to suppress a smile.

‘Are you taking the mickey?’ Ron asked, his eyes narrowed.

‘No,’ Harry said quickly, his face impassive. ‘Go on, you were saying?’

‘Right, well, I find out she’s writing to Krum, yeah, and it bugs me because she told me this summer she’s all worked up about not getting to talk to anyone about...about last term and all,’ Ron said, suddenly unable to look at Harry. ‘And it turns out she’s writing to Krum and telling him. I mean, I thought we were her mates, right? Then she says she doesn’t want to burden me, like I’m some git who can’t handle a bit of her stuff.’

‘You know she was writing to Krum about last term?’ Harry asked, looking down at his feet.

‘Well, yeah,’ Ron said shiftily. ‘I mean, it sounded that way.’

‘You know, Ron, maybe they ARE just friends,’ Harry said. ‘It’s not like it’s unheard of, you know, a bloke and a girl being just friends. Hermione and I are just friends, remember?’

‘I know,’ Ron said, a little defensively. ‘But I’m telling you, Krum doesn’t want to just be her friend.’

‘Sounds to me like you don’t want to be her friend, either,’ said Harry, stroking Hedwig’s feathers again.

‘What?’ Ron said, incredulously. ‘Of course I want to be Hermione’s friend! Why do you think I’m so upset about the row we had?’

‘Think about it, Ron,’ said Harry, giving him a look that to Ron suggested Harry was trying to make a very obvious point to someone very stupid.

‘Think about what?’ Ron nearly shouted, now feeling even more aggravated than before. Would everyone please stop with all this cute hint-dropping and be up front with him for a change?

‘Did you have a word with Bill?’ Harry said, changing the subject smoothly. Ron realized he was grateful for this and seized upon a more comfortable thing to complain about.

‘No,’ Ron said, ‘but I will first thing tomorrow, that’s for damn sure. Honestly, what’s he thinking? Does he have a death wish or something?’

‘Not all the Dark Arts teachers have died, you know,’ Harry said. ‘Maybe Bill will just get sacked like Lupin.’

‘Well, I hope he gets sacked tomorrow,’ Ron said hotly. ‘Do you have any idea how much crap I’m going to get for this? From Fred AND George AND Malfoy and all his little prats. And Mum, she’ll be on it. She’ll probably have Bill tell her all kinds of dirt about me and I’ll get a Howler every other day. WHY are you laughing?’

‘Sorry,’ Harry said, trying very hard not to snigger.

‘Today was bloody awful,’ Ron said glumly. ‘I’m turning in.’

‘Me, too,’ said Harry, still smiling.

Harry said nothing more, only got up and put on his pyjamas. Ron noticed that although he looked fitter, physically, than he had this time last year, Harry’s shoulders had a pronounced stoop to them, as though his burdens were literally weighing him down. Ron opened his mouth to say something but thought better of it. It’ll keep, he thought, Harry’ll say something when he’s ready. Ron couldn’t even begrudge Harry laughing at him, he realized. Let him laugh, Ron thought. Bloke deserves a laugh after what he’s had to deal with.

Ron put on his own pyjamas and climbed into bed, knowing he would sleep badly. Between his latest row with Hermione, having to put up with that git of a Head Boy, trying to help Harry through his problems and having his oldest brother as one of his teachers, Ron had never looked forward to starting school less.

Chapter Six: Dark Arts Lessons and Confrontations in the Corridor

The weather on the morning of the start of classes did nothing to improve Ron's mood. The sky was so dark it was nearly black, and rain pelted the grounds and the castle so hard that the glass windowpanes shook.

Harry and Ron's schedules were quite changed this year. They had both decided on careers as Aurors and as such had been able to reduce the number of classes they had to take in order to focus on those classes required for their chosen careers. Ron and Harry both were delighted that they no longer had to take Divination and had been given the option of cutting out either Astronomy or Care of Magical Creatures. They both immediately dropped Astronomy; Hagrid taught Care of Magical Creatures.

Unfortunately, their Auror careers depended on taking very difficult lessons in Transfiguration, Herbology, Charms, Defence Against the Dark Arts and Potions. And to Ron's utter annoyance, History of Magic was still a required course for all students. He wasn't sure how he could take two more years of Professor Binns, and worse, now that Hermione wasn't speaking to him he was quite sure he'd have to start taking his own notes in class. Furthermore, because they had two fewer classes, that meant more lessons in the classes they were taking.

'Double Potions three days a week,' Ron grumbled to Harry. 'There ought to be a law against that.'

Hermione still wasn't speaking to him at breakfast and in fact chose to sit next to Neville. Ron felt a rush of annoyance. Yes, they'd fought, but was he really so repulsive that Hermione couldn't even SIT next to him?

His mood darkened further when Eddie Carmichael glided over to their table and bent down to say hello to Hermione. Ron couldn't hear what they were saying but he felt the blood pounding in his ears when he saw the way Eddie smiled at Hermione and the way she blushed at his attention. He was livid when she tossed her silky hair--which she had worn down today--and laughed in a tinkling, simpering sort of way. He was furious when he saw Eddie quite obviously run his eyes over Hermione's pale neck and down to the swell of her breasts beneath her robes.

'Ron, are you going to eat that banana or just crush it?' Harry asked.

Ron looked up and saw that the banana he had been holding was now a messy piece of mush inside a peel. He dropped it on his plate, disgusted.

‘You're in a good mood,’ Harry said dryly.

‘Didn't sleep well,’ Ron muttered, which was true.

‘Me, neither,’ Harry said dully. Ron felt a rush of guilt, dwelling on his own problems.

‘What have we got this morning?’

‘Double Transfiguration,’ Harry said, looking over the schedule, looking glad for the change of subject.

‘Great,’ said Ron, pouring himself a very large cup of coffee. ‘Just the way I like to start out my mornings. With McGonagall breathing down our necks.’

‘At least it's not Potions,’ Harry pointed out, his eyes very cold.

‘No, that fun comes this afternoon,’ Ron said sullenly.

‘Speak for yourself,’ Ginny said, sitting down next to him. ‘I have Defence Against the Dark Arts this afternoon with Bill. I can't BELIEVE he didn't tell us about this.’

‘Yeah, well, I'm going to talk to him after class, that's for sure,’ said Ron. ‘Having a close relative for a teacher, I ask you!’

‘Just be glad it's not Umbridge,’ Harry pointed out, looking at the thin trace of a scar on his right hand, a relic of Umbridge's brutal detentions.

‘Speaking of evil fat toads,’ Ginny said, ‘Umbridge has turned up. In St. Mungo's.’

‘St. Mungo's?’ Harry repeated. ‘How'd she end up there?’

‘She was found wandering round Hogsmeade, actually,’ said Ginny. ‘Talking to herself and waving her arms around and muttering about centaurs, I think. It was in *The Daily Prophet*, didn't you see?’

‘I don't read that rag anymore, you know that,’ Harry said darkly.

‘Right,’ said Ginny, holding up her hands to placate him. ‘Don't bite my head off. I just read Hermione's copy. She's still getting it.’

‘Where is Hermione?’ Ron asked, noticing that her seat was now empty.

‘She went back upstairs to get her books, said she'd meet you down here,’ said Ginny.

‘She did?’ Ron said hopefully. Maybe she'd start talking to him again after all.

‘She just said Harry, not both of you,’ said Ginny, sounding apologetic.

‘Oh,’ said Ron dully, staring down into his porridge. He had completely lost his appetite.

The day did not improve much from there. Double Transfiguration with Professor McGonagall had always been one of the most difficult classes, but now, she warned them in what sounded to Ron like dire tones, they were in for the most difficult two years of their transfiguration training. They would transfiguring larger animals like dogs and sheep into furniture and other useful items before moving on to perhaps the most difficult form of transfiguration possible, the Conjuring Spells.

Hermione took a seat next to Susan Bones, a Hufflepuff girl, and Ron felt strangely bereft as he took his seat next to Harry.

Today's assignment was to transform cats into footrests. Hermione got hers in three tries, as usual, and Professor McGonagall not only awarded her 150% on the day's assignment, she also awarded ten points to Gryffindor. Susan Bones managed to get her cat turned into a footrest by the end of the lesson. Harry and Ron both turned their cats into something resembling a cylindrical pillow with cat legs and a tail. They got extra homework that night.

At the lunch break Hermione again avoided sitting next to Harry and Ron.

'I don't have a disease, you know,' Ron muttered under his breath.

'Maybe you should apologize to her,' Harry suggested.

'I DID!' Ron bit out angrily, nearly spluttering Harry with a bit of his ham sandwich. 'I told her I was sorry on the train, and she just pushed me away.'

'Maybe you should try again,' Harry said, unable to hide the grin on his face. 'Get down on bended knee or something.'

'Shut up,' Ron said irritably, throwing his sandwich down on his plate unfinished. Once again, he had lost his appetite, and this was nearly as irritating as Hermione refusing to speak to him.

Their next class was, to Ron's further annoyance, Double Potions, but his reluctance to go to their next class seemed to pale in comparison to Harry's reaction. Dark hatred was glittering in Harry's eyes now, and Ron swallowed. He hoped Harry wouldn't do anything stupid or lose his temper in class the way he did last year, with Umbridge. Who was to say Snape hadn't heard of the way Umbridge punished students in her detentions and decided that this sadistic method was the perfect way for students to serve detentions in his classes?

They arrived early and took up their usual spots in the back of the room. Hermione sat next to Neville Longbottom, who for the first time since Ron had known him did not look terrified as they waited for Snape to arrive. Snape had terrorized Neville even worse than Harry from Day One, but something had changed very palpably in Neville over the past year. Maybe it was their old D.A. meetings, where Neville had finally become very good at using defensive spells. Or maybe it was the battle at the Ministry, in which Neville had run into and been briefly tortured by the very witch who had tortured his own parents into insanity. Whatever it was, Neville no longer looked

remotely like the shy, forgetful boy he had always been. There was a determination in his eyes and a set to his jaw. It was a bit unnerving to Ron, he had to admit.

Then it occurred to Ron that Neville shouldn't even be in this class, considering how poorly he always had done in Potions. Ron wondered whether McGonagall had used any of her influence on Neville's behalf, or if perhaps his grandmother had done.

Just then Snape swept into the room, his black robes billowing behind him. The class, which had been filled with the drone of chattering, fell silent at once.

'Welcome to Sixth Year Potions,' Snape said in his hissing sort of voice. 'I see that several familiar faces have returned.' He gave a dry smile to Draco Malfoy, who was sitting next to one of his big, dumb cronies, Vincent Crabbe. 'Apparently you all did well enough on your O.W.L.s to qualify for this year's class. I must admit I'm surprised to see a few of you...' And his eyes travelled over to where Neville was sitting, then to Harry and Ron. Harry glowered at Snape openly but said nothing.

'Obviously some of you were not as dismal at potion-making as I had thought,' Snape said, smiling viciously. 'That said, rest assured that the next two years will be the most rigorous of your Hogwarts careers. Anyone receiving less than A in this level will be dismissed permanently from this class. You have been warned.'

Ron saw a muscle twitch in Harry's jaw. Don't lose it, Ron thought desperately. You need this class if you want to be an Auror. But Harry merely clenched and unclenched his fists.

'Today we will be starting with Veritaserum,' Snape continued. 'The Potion of Truth. Highly useful in interrogations.' He glared at Harry. 'Ingredients and instructions are on the blackboard.' Snape waved his wand and the words appeared.

Ron and Harry set to work at once. Even with a double period one could not always count on finishing his or her potion in time. Ron thought nervously of Snape's pronouncement that any grade below an A would result in getting kicked out of the class. He read and re-read the ingredients and instructions several times before even picking up the small clump of mother-of-pearl dust that was the first ingredient.

In the end Ron's and Harry's potions looked to be good; Snape told them that the potion should be pearlescent and clear, with a tinge of blue. Ron's was a bit more green than blue, he thought anxiously, but maybe it would do. He scooped up a small amount in a flask and took it to Snape's desk; Harry came next, followed by Hermione, whose potion looked perfect, as usual.

'Results of your potions grade will be given in the next class,' Snape announced as Malfoy's other crony, Gregory Goyle, plunked his potion--a putrid, cloudy brown color (why on EARTH were those two stupid lumps in Potions, Ron thought angrily)--onto Snape's desk. 'Homework is a full parchment essay on the properties of mother-of-pearl.'

Ron groaned inwardly. He hated doing essays for Snape. Harry looked no happier about it.

‘Well, that wasn't horrible,’ Ron said, trying to sound cheerful, for Harry looked positively ready to explode. ‘Only mildly awful, really.’

‘Yeah,’ said Harry through clenched teeth. ‘I can't believe we have to take two more years of that class just to be Aurors. I can't BELIEVE Crabbe and Goyle are back.’

‘No kidding,’ said Ron darkly, as the two of them, flanking Malfoy, passed without so much as a glance back at he and Harry. ‘Stupid prats. Maybe Crabbe's Dad used an Imperius Curse on the wizard who gave them the O.W.L. test.’

‘What's next?’ asked Harry, sounding thoroughly put out.

‘Herbology,’ Ron announced.

They headed off to the greenhouses, grateful that Herbology was not a double period, although Professor Sprout was a far more pleasant teacher to be around than Snape.

The only problem with going to the greenhouses was that one had to go outdoors to get there. The rain had stopped late that morning but it had turned the grounds to mud. By the time they reached the greenhouse their shoes and ankles were thick with it, and every step they took mud oozed and squelched between their toes.

Herbology was, however, one of the more fun classes. Today they were working with funny little plants called *mimulus mimbletonia*. Neville was so beside himself with delight about this that Ron wondered whether Neville might just wet himself. He produced his own plant and Ron remembered that Neville had gotten it last year, but Ron never did learn just what one did with it.

He found out quickly enough that poking the *mimulus mimbletonia* was a mistake. When he accidentally prodded it with his wand stinksap flew everywhere, spattering on him, Harry, Neville, and Hermione. It smelled so horrible that Ron felt sick.

‘Stupid, silly boy,’ Professor Sprout said, shaking her head but smiling. ‘*Scourgify!*’ She waved her wand and the stinksap disappeared, but not before Draco Malfoy and his Slytherin cronies screamed with laughter.

‘As you can see,’ Professor Sprout went on, ‘*mimulus mimbletonia* has a powerful defence mechanism. Stinksap is a very useful bug repellent.’

‘And a people repellent,’ Seamus muttered.

‘Yes, that too, Mr. Finnigan,’ Professor Sprout said lightly. ‘But the plant itself also has many uses. When stinksap is fermented and boiled with mature, crushed *mimulus mimbletonia* leaves and begonia extract it creates a powerful tonic that is an excellent antidote for many different kinds of poisons.’

The lesson ended with another homework assignment, involving reading a chapter on plants with defensive abilities in *1,001 Magical Herbs and Fungi*.

Ron returned to the common room before dinner, already feeling tired and irritable. Hermione's continued refusal to speak to him was grating on him far worse than he had ever expected. A part of him knew he ought to apologize to her for making her cry, but the other side of him resisted. He couldn't understand why Hermione couldn't see what a boy like Eddie Carmichael was really all about. The smarmy way he smiled at her, the way he talked. He really was like Gilderoy Lockhart, Ron thought. And, Ron thought furiously, he was selling black-market brain addling drugs last year! Talk about breaking the rules.

'Fainting Fancies,' Ron muttered to the portrait of the fat lady, which swung open and allowed him to enter the Gryffindor common room.

The common room was occupied by a number of younger students. Ron nodded at them and hurried upstairs, not keen to be engaged in conversation with anyone just yet. He found Harry in the dorm room sitting on his bed, looking a bit bewildered.

'What's up?' Ron asked, throwing his bag on his bed.

'Well, looks like I'm Quidditch captain,' Harry said, blinking.

'That's...that's brilliant!' Ron said. Finally, he thought, some good news for a change. 'You totally deserve it, you've been on the team for ages, you're the best flyer in the school.'

'I guess,' Harry said, shrugging.

'Harry,' Ron said, puzzled. 'You DO want to be captain, right?'

'Yeah,' Harry said weakly. 'It's just...I haven't played in almost two years. I mean, fourth year we had the Triwizard and last year...' His voice trailed off. He clearly didn't want to talk about getting banned from Quidditch last year.

'So, you're back,' said Ron bracingly. 'And you're captain. All we need are a few good Chasers and a Beater and the cup's in the bag.'

'Maybe,' Harry said doubtfully. 'I dunno. I'll be really rusty.'

'Rubbish,' said Ron. 'Look, Harry, you're a natural, okay. You fly better than anyone, and you've got the best broom in the school. And anyway, you flew a bunch this summer. What are you getting worked up about?'

'Yeah,' said Harry, sounding like he was trying to convince himself. 'You're right. I guess I'm just a little surprised, after what happened, you know, with...with Sirius, and everything.'

Ron swallowed. Harry looked down at his shoes, and there was a moment of uncomfortable silence.

'I'm sure...' Ron began, 'I'm sure Sirius'd be real proud, you know. You being captain.'

Harry smiled, but it was the saddest smile Ron had ever seen. 'You think?'

'Yeah,' said Ron firmly. 'Definitely.'

'Thanks,' said Harry, looking very quickly at Ron and then down at his shoes. Ron nodded, not knowing what else to say.

'So,' Harry said suddenly, in a slightly forced voice, 'I guess we have to hold try-outs. And arrange practices.'

'Yeah,' said Ron, grateful to be back on a happier subject. 'Ginny mentioned she wanted to try out. She's really good.'

'Yeah, she is,' Harry agreed. 'What about the beaters. Who are they, Kirke and Sloper?'

'Sloper's not coming back to the team,' Ron said, not looking at all concerned about this. 'Think he never did get over smashing Angelina in the face with his bat last year. Kirke's around, though, so I guess...'

'He's still in,' Harry said firmly. 'He's not so bad anymore. So we need two Chasers and a Beater. Try-outs are on Friday, I'll arrange with McGonagall on the time, but five o'clock work?'

'Sounds fine,' said Ron, finally feeling glad to be back at school. Classes might be drudgery and he had no idea if Hermione would ever speak to him again but at least there was Quidditch to look forward to.

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The following day Harry, Ron and Hermione had Double Charms followed by Defence Against the Dark Arts in the afternoon. Hermione was still maintaining her frosty silence, but Ron was so appalled about being a student in Bill's class that he forgot about Hermione, at least during breakfast.

In their Charms lesson, however, Ron felt the same hollow ache he'd been feeling, he realized, ever since seeing Hermione on that first day over the summer. It was even more acute in this lesson, as they were practicing Serenity Charms.

Ron's attempts at the charm were weak at best. Harry reported a slight and very brief feeling of peace a second or two after Ron tried to perform the charm on him, but it passed so fast as to be almost unnoticeable. Harry did not have much better luck trying the charm on Ron. Ron's brain was so addled he did not think he would ever achieve serenity. But their shoddy charm work was nothing compared to Neville, who accidentally hit Hermione with a Melancholy Charm and caused her to burst into tears. Professor Flitwick, who was perched on top of his usual pile of books, sighed, waved his wand at Hermione and said '*Pace!*' She immediately stopped crying and produced a perfect Serenity Charm on Neville.

She then caught Ron's gaze--Ron realized he had been staring at her--and gave him a rather cold smile, but proceeded to ignore him for the rest of the lesson.

‘Well, that's progress,’ Harry said, noting Hermione's smile. ‘At least she's looking at you.’

‘Yeah,’ said Ron, trying to feel a bit more hopeful.

They broke for lunch. Ron felt suddenly famished and he and Harry headed straight for the Great Hall when Ron groaned out loud.

‘What?’ Harry asked.

‘Carmichael,’ Ron said darkly, as the handsome Head Boy glided (how on earth did he DO that, anyway?) smoothly down the hall, making a beeline for Hermione.

‘Hello, Hermione,’ he said in that despicable, smarmy voice that made Ron want to break something.

‘Oh, hello, Eddie,’ she said, her voice sounding very girlish and very ridiculous.

‘Let's get out of here,’ Ron said quickly. ‘Or I might throw up.’

Harry suppressed a smile and they hurried off toward the Great Hall.

But once there, Ron found his appetite had again deserted him.

‘Eat up, Ron,’ Harry said, ‘You're going to pass out if you don't put something in your stomach.’

‘You sound like my Mum,’ Ron said glumly, picking up a sandwich from one of the platters on the table.

Harry said nothing but took another bite of his sandwich. Ron stared at his.

‘Actually,’ Ron said sadly, ‘you sound like Hermione.’

‘Ron, just TALK to her, will you?’ Harry said, sounding exasperated. ‘You're miserable, she's miserable...’

‘Yeah, she looked really miserable back there, talking to Eddie,’ Ron said dully.

‘Eddie's an empty pretty boy who flatters her, that's all,’ Harry said firmly. ‘You two are mates. Start acting like mates, for god's sake.’

Ron rolled his eyes and bit into his sandwich.

However much he lacked an appetite, Ron had never wanted a lunch hour to end less than this one, because the end of the hour meant his first Defence Against the Dark

Arts class with Bill. The bell rang and Ron threw down his sandwich, which was only half eaten.

‘Great,’ Ron said. ‘Harry, you think you can do a Deafening Charm on me, because I’m about to get the mickey taken out of me something fierce.’

‘Malfoy’s not going to say a word about it as long as you and Bill are in the same room, you know,’ Harry pointed out.

‘Oh yeah,’ said Ron, brightening considerably. ‘I forgot. Hey, maybe if Malfoy screws up in class Bill will hex him or give him lots of detentions.’ On this happier thought they headed to their lesson.

When they entered the room they were surprised to find that it was already half full, but that nearly all the seats filled were filled with girls. Parvati and Lavender sat at a table in the very front of the room, both alternately giggling and gazing up at Bill with dazed, dreamy looks on their faces. Hannah Abbott sat in the next row with another Hufflepuff girl Ron did not know; Ron noticed that Hannah had written ‘William Weasley’ on her notebook and drawn little hearts around it.

Hermione was sitting next to Susan Bones again; Susan, too, had a kind of rapt look on her face. Ron rolled his eyes. His brother, the pretty boy. Great. At least, he thought gratefully, Hermione isn’t going all googly-eyed over Bill, too.

The classroom slowly filled up, the boys now entering. Malfoy came in with Crabbe and Goyle and they all sneered at Harry and Ron; Malfoy threw a disgusted, derisive look at Bill, who had turned his back to the class to fetch something out of his bag.

Bill turned around, and Ron sat down quickly next to Harry. As usual, Bill looked stylish, polished, and entirely cool. His hair, thick and blond-streaked from the sun, was pulled back into its perfectly smooth ponytail. He had exchanged his dangling fang earring with a tiny stud that sparkled. His robes, which were entirely plain, were nonetheless spotlessly clean and fit him perfectly. Ron stifled a snort when he heard Lavender sigh out loud.

‘Good afternoon, class,’ Bill said, in a commanding, ringing voice that made the whole class, even Ron, jump. ‘Welcome to Defence Against the Dark Arts, Level Six. I’m Professor Weasley, and the headmaster hired me to fill this spot which was vacated by Professor Umbridge.’

Several audible hisses went up in the classroom.

‘Yes, yes,’ Bill said, putting out his hands. ‘Let’s get this out of the way. Umbridge was a foul toad and you all hated her. But she’s gone and it’s time to focus on the present, not the past. Things have changed. The Ministry of Magic is not going to be interfering at Hogwarts this year or any other year. Your lessons in defensive magic are going to be very different this year, because of the very real threats facing us. I’ll warn you right now that even if you have absolutely no plans to enter careers where defensive magic is a requirement, at no time is defensive magic more important than right now.’

Ron stared at Bill and felt a grudging sense of admiration for his oldest brother.

‘I understand that many of you did manage to work on some spells last year,’ Bill went on, giving Harry a barely detectable wink. ‘I’m aware of what you covered in your O.W.Ls. We’ll review those spells a bit, but I want to get you all started on more advanced stuff, so be prepared.’

Ron gave Harry a look, and they both wondered what Bill could mean by this.

‘Today we’re going to practice the basics, just to give everyone a little memory boost,’ Bill said. ‘Pair up, step back from your desks, please.’

He waved his wand and the desks slid neatly out of the way.

‘Let’s do a round of Disarming Spells,’ Bill said. ‘After that we’ll do Stunning and Silencing Charms.’

The class turned out to be far better than Ron had expected. Bill was, to Ron’s amazement, a very good teacher, patient, firm, but very much in control of the class. This did not stop Malfoy and his cronies from shooting dirty looks at Bill every chance they got, or sneering looks at Ron, but Ron didn’t care. He was embarrassed, however, when Bill came over to him and Harry during their practice of silencing charms and gave Ron a tip on how to truly silence Harry, instead of making Harry’s voice simply sound soft.

‘Just give the wand a sharper stab at the throat,’ Bill said, demonstrating with his wand but not uttering the incantation.

‘Yeah,’ Ron said, nodding, wishing Bill would hurry up and go over to Malfoy--who was smiling with glee and pointing at Ron--and tell the little sod that his charm work was junk.

The lesson ended with the Total Body Bind Spell, which Harry nailed on the first try and Ron got on the third.

‘Good work, everyone,’ said Bill, as they gathered up their bags and stowed their wands away. ‘No homework, but we’ll be doing Impediment Jinxes and Confounding Charms next, so you might want to think about practicing those. Come to my office if you want permission to use the classroom, I’ll make sure it’s available during off hours.’ He gave Ron a smile and Ron, feeling his ears go pink, nodded.

Ron and Harry were just heading out the door, when Bill called, ‘Mr. Potter!’

Ron rolled his eyes, mouthing ‘Mr. Potter,’ but Harry simply turned around.

‘Yes?’

‘Hang on a minute,’ Bill said, walking up to them both. ‘I just wanted a word with you. Do you mind?’

‘No,’ said Harry, glancing at Ron. ‘I’ll catch up with you.’

Ron nodded, wondering what Bill could want with Harry, and left the classroom, closing the door behind him in time to see Hermione walking away quickly, followed by Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle, who were all jeering at her.

‘You’re in it now, Granger,’ Malfoy sneered. ‘Think you’re safe because those Death Eaters are in Azkaban? Think again. You’ll get worse than you got last year--’

‘Back off, Malfoy!’ Ron had run ahead and darted in front of Hermione to head Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle off. ‘Leave her alone.’ His wand was out.

‘No magic in the corridors, Weasley,’ Malfoy jeered. ‘Or should I call your big brother and have him give you detention?’

‘Ron, don’t--’ Hermione said nervously, putting a hand on his arm.

‘*Professor* Weasley,’ Ron spat, rather liking how the title sounded, ‘would be happy to give you a year’s worth of detentions when he finds out you’re going around threatening people.’

‘Who said anything about a threat?’ Malfoy asked smoothly, in mockingly indignant voice. ‘I wasn’t threatening the Mudblood, I was just telling her the facts.’

Ron felt another burst of hot anger and he strode right up to Malfoy, his wand directly in Malfoy’s pointed face.

‘You call her that again, and I swear you’ll regret it,’ he growled.

‘Ron!’

‘I’m just terrified,’ Malfoy hissed, his eyes narrowing.

‘Ron, please, don’t.’

‘Listen to your girlfriend, Weasel-king,’ Malfoy said. ‘It’s not wise to get into it with me.’

‘What are you going to do, set your dad on me again?’ Ron challenged. ‘Oh, wait, I forgot, he’s in Azkaban with Voldemort’s other slaves.’

Hermione gasped out loud, and Malfoy’s face tightened in fury. When he spoke, his voice was shaking with rage.

‘You’ve just sealed your fate, Weasley,’ Malfoy spat, and Crabbe and Goyle each took a step forward. ‘You’re right up there with Potter now. And the Mudblood. Dead.’

‘Tell it to someone who gives a--’

‘Chaps, what's the trouble here?’ Bill had just come out with Harry. Ron saw that his older brother had his hand inside his robes.

‘Nothing,’ Malfoy said, still staring daggers at Ron. ‘I was just leaving. Come on, Crabbe, Goyle.’ He stalked away with both of them, but not before deliberately swinging his bag and smacking Hermione in the ribs with it. She cried out in pain.

‘Hey!’ Ron yelled as he started to stride after Malfoy. He started to raise his wand when Hermione grabbed his arm and yanked it down.

‘Don't!’ she cried out.

‘Ron,’ Bill said warningly.

‘You saw what he just did!’ Ron said, outraged.

‘It's FINE,’ Hermione said anxiously, still rubbing her ribs, and Ron turned to look at her. He was horrified to see that her eyes were shining with tears.

‘Bill, you can't just--’

‘It's Professor Weasley,’ corrected Bill, ‘and now is not the time to go picking a fight with Draco Malfoy. You all have bigger fish to fry, remember?’

With that, Bill strode away, his robes billowing out behind him.

‘It's "*Professor Weasley*,"’ Ron mocked in a sing-song voice. ‘Git.’ He glanced at Hermione, who was very pale.

‘Are you all right, Hermione?’ he asked, his anger with Bill immediately forgotten. He put a hand over hers, which was still on her ribs.

‘I'm...okay,’ she said, but she was looking at Ron in a very odd way.

‘What?’ he asked.

‘You...you said the name,’ she whispered, looking awestruck.

‘What?’

‘You said Voldemort's name,’ Hermione said. ‘Just now. When you were in Malfoy's face.’

‘I did?’ Ron asked, alarmed, and he immediately ran over his confrontation with Malfoy in his head. ‘Blimey. I did.’

‘Congratulations,’ Harry said dryly.

‘I can't believe you said the name,’ said Hermione, looking completely amazed.

‘Well,’ said Ron, feeling a bit defensive now, ‘it's not *that* big a deal, is it? I mean, Malfoy was going after you and all and you know, I *hate* it when he does that. I guess the name just sort of came out. Weird. I dunno why I was so scared of it before.’

‘Oh, Ron!’ Hermione burst into tears and flung her arms around him. Ron dropped his book bag, where it landed rather painfully on his foot, but he seemed to only dimly feel the pain as Hermione buried her face into his chest.

‘What's this about?’ he asked, bewildered. ‘You weren't even talking to me five minutes ago!’ And without thinking he put his arms around her waist.

Harry caught Ron's eye and smirked.

‘I'm sorry!’ Hermione sniffed, pulling away from him. ‘I'm sorry we fought. Can we please be friends again?’

Ron, feeling a bit disappointed that she had let go of him, felt a huge smile spread across his face.

‘Yeah,’ he said, relieved and pleased. ‘I'm sorry, too, okay. I was way out of line before--’

‘Oh, just forget about it!’ Hermione cried, hugging him again. Ron nearly fell backward off his feet. The day was definitely looking up; for a second Ron wondered if maybe he should fight with Hermione every day, if it meant that they could make up with her flinging herself at him. It was rather nice, hugging her.

Ron looked at Harry, whose smirk had turned into a very amused grin.

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## *Chapter Seven: Ron in Denial*

Hermione let go of Ron and wiped her eyes.

‘I must look a mess,’ she said, sniffing. ‘I’ll go freshen up and see you both at dinner.’

‘See you later,’ Harry said, waving as she hurried down the corridor and in the direction of the Gryffindor common room. Ron watched her, following the movement of her hair.

‘Earth to Ron,’ said Harry, waving a hand in front of Ron’s face. ‘Do you want to go to dinner or not?’

‘Oh, uh, not yet,’ said Ron, recovering himself. ‘Actually, I think I’ll speak to Bill. He owes Ginny and me an explanation about this.’

‘Right,’ said Harry.

‘What did he want with you, anyway?’ Ron asked.

‘Oh, well, uh.’ Harry’s voice trailed off, and he looked very uncomfortable.

‘Never mind,’ said Ron quickly. ‘I’ll get it from Bill, if that’s okay.’

‘Yeah,’ said Harry, sounding relieved. ‘I’m starving, I’m going to dinner. See you shortly, then?’

‘Sure,’ said Ron, watching Harry walk away, his shoulders stooped as they had been all summer.

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‘Come in.’ Bill’s voice was muted behind his closed office door.

Ron opened the door slowly and entered the office. Bill had already made the office distinctly his; there were models of Egyptian tombs and miniature statues of various Egyptian gods spread out all over the place. A huge sarcophagus rested against one wall, and another wall was covered in a massive painted mural of the pyramids. Bill was sitting at his desk, his robes now draped over the back of his chair, his quill scratching over a piece of parchment.

‘Hey,’ said Ron, and Bill looked up.

‘Ron,’ said Bill, smiling. ‘What’s up?’

The benign look on Bill’s face gave Ron a rush of indignation.

‘What’s up?’ he demanded. ‘What are you doing here, that’s what’s up! Why didn’t you tell Ginny and me you were going to be here? Why didn’t Mum and Dad tell us?’

‘Relax, Ron,’ said Bill, standing up and leaning forward on his desk. ‘This only happened two days ago, okay? Dumbledore needed a new teacher--’

‘And you volunteered?’ Ron cut in. ‘Are you mad? D’you know what’s happened to the last five teachers who’ve worked this post?’

‘It’s just a temporary thing,’ Bill said. ‘Just for this year. Look, Ron, I know this is a surprise but believe me, there was nobody else who would do it. Dumbledore only came to me when the situation got desperate. In any case, I wanted to be here.’

‘Why?’

‘Because of what happened last term,’ Bill said firmly. ‘Because you and Ginny almost got killed by Death Eaters. I talked to Mum and Dad about it and they agree--’

‘Oh, perfect,’ Ron said acidly, flopping down in the chair opposite Bill’s desk. ‘I KNEW Mum had something to do with this. She’s sent you to baby-sit us, hasn’t she?’

‘It wasn’t Mum’s decision,’ said Bill firmly, sitting back down and folding his hands placidly in front of him. ‘It was mine. But yes, she and Dad both feel better knowing I’m here and can keep an eye on you and Ginny. And Harry and Hermione, for that matter.’

Ron nodded, still feeling disgruntled.

‘Look,’ said Bill, a wry smile forming on his lips, ‘I’m not going to be spying on you, if that’s what you’re worried about. Just think of me as your teacher first and everything will be fine.’

‘Yeah,’ said Ron, feeling anger bubble in him again. ‘Right. *Professor Weasley*.’

‘Ron--’

‘Why didn’t you give Malfoy a detention?’ Ron snapped, standing up and pacing the room angrily. ‘You know what happened to Hermione last year, don’t you? She almost died. Had to spend a week in hospital drinking a million potions because her insides got all messed up by that Death Eater. And she’s still hurting, did you know that? And Malfoy smacked her right where it hurt, and you did nothing.’

‘Ron, listen to me,’ Bill said in a sharp voice, standing up again and crossing in front of his desk to look down at Ron. ‘Just because Malfoy’s dad is in Azkaban doesn’t mean Malfoy’s family can’t make trouble for this school, or for you, or me, or Harry, or especially Hermione. Malfoy’s mother is powerful in her own right, and she has connections. And with the Dementors gone from Azkaban it’s only a matter of time before those Death Eaters break out.’

‘But Hogwarts is safe!’ Ron said.

‘You-Know-Who penetrated the Ministry of Magic, Ron!’ Bill snapped. ‘He got inside right under Fudge’s nose, remember? He nearly killed Harry again. The Ministry is one of the safest places in our world but You-Know-Who still got through. He’s not going to let Hogwarts stand in his way. I’m sorry that Hermione is still hurting, and believe me, I have no love for Draco Malfoy or anyone else in his family, but you’ll pardon me if I’m a bit more worried about protecting the lives of the students here than satisfying your desire to see Malfoy get punished by your older brother.’

Ron stared at Bill and a horrible shame filled him.

‘I’m sorry,’ Ron mumbled, looking down.

Bill put a hand on his shoulder. ‘It’s okay,’ he said. ‘I know this isn’t easy for you and Ginny. And I promise I’m not going to go chasing after you, okay? No tell-all letters to Mum or anything, I swear.’

‘Thanks,’ said Ron, still feeling ashamed, but then he remembered something else he meant to ask. ‘So, what did you want with Harry?’

Bill paused, looking uncertain.

‘You might as well tell me,’ said Ron. ‘He’ll tell me anyway if you don’t.’

Bill smiled and rolled his eyes. ‘I asked Harry if he would be okay with starting the D.A. up again. You know, so everyone can practice what they’ve learned. He’s agreed to it. I also asked him to help me in lessons. I want to teach people how to repel curses, and Harry can repel the Imperius Curse. I figure he can demonstrate it to the other students.’

‘Right,’ said Ron, not comfortable with the idea of his best mate being used as a guinea pig in lessons.

‘Harry’s up for it,’ Bill said, reading Ron’s anxious expression. ‘I wouldn’t have asked him otherwise.’

‘Right,’ said Ron, feeling only slightly better about it. ‘Look, Bill. I didn’t want you to give Malfoy a detention...just because of me, okay? It was because--’

‘Of Hermione,’ interrupted Bill. ‘Yeah, I know. It’s not uncommon for a bloke to lose his head a bit when his girl’s getting messed with.’

‘Hermione’s not my girl,’ said Ron, blushing to the roots of his hair. ‘She’s my best friend, that’s all.’

‘Right,’ said Bill, smiling in a knowing sort of way, and Ron felt his face get very hot. ‘Well, anyway, I’m sure she appreciates it. You always being there and sticking up for her.’

‘Yeah,’ said Ron, looking at his feet. ‘So, I’m going to dinner. See you around, I guess.’ He made a beeline for the door, suddenly not wanting to spend another second under the scrutinizing gaze of his older brother.

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Ron’s elation at making up with Hermione lasted through dinner. No sooner had the meal ended than Eddie Carmichael had come over to talk to her again. Ron bit his lip to keep from saying something rude and quickly left the Great Hall, announcing to no one in particular that he had studying to do. He and Harry hurried off toward the Common Room.

Their homework that night was as bad as ever and Ron had his usual trouble concentrating. After a half an hour Hermione still had not turned up and Ron’s temper was beginning to simmer as he waded through *1,001 Magical Herbs and Fungi*, trying to read up on Carnivorous Venus Flytraps. He was just about to throw down his book in frustration and start looking for her when she climbed through the portrait hole, looking flushed.

‘Hi!’ she said brightly, setting her bag down on the floor and collapsing into the cushy sofa in front of the fire.

‘Where have you been?’ Ron asked sharply.

‘Oh, just...taking a walk,’ said Hermione. ‘I think I ate a bit too much at dinner.’

‘Uh huh,’ said Ron sceptically, studying her. She looked very pretty; her hair was pulled back from her face but the back hung loose around her shoulders. Her lips looked very red, and Ron had a horrible image of her and Eddie kissing.

‘So where’d you walk?’ Ron asked, trying to keep his voice casual, but Harry shot him a warning look. Drop it, the look said.

‘Oh, just around,’ Hermione said cryptically, opening *The Standard Book of Spells: Grade Six* and burying her nose in it.

Ron gripped his quill tighter. He was about to open his mouth when Harry coughed and threw him another warning look. Ron swallowed, scowled, and returned to his Herbology homework, his mind swirling with images not of Carnivorous Venus Flytraps but of Eddie Carmichael smiling at Hermione in that slick, smarmy way of his.

‘I’m going to bed,’ he announced, feeling a bit sick.

‘Now?’ Harry asked. ‘It’s barely eight o’clock.’

‘Yeah, well,’ said Ron, searching for an excuse, ‘I have a headache.’

Harry rolled his eyes, and Hermione, absorbed in her book, said absently, ‘Feel better, Ron.’

Ron looked at her for a moment and felt that familiar hollow ache starting in his chest again. They had made up and he was pleased about that, but could she at least look like she was happy to see him? After he had defended her-again-from Malfoy? After he had FINALLY spoken the name of You-Know-Who aloud? Maybe if he stood there long enough she'd get up and hug him again.

But she didn't. Ron gave up and walked glumly up the stairs, changing slowly out of his robes and into pyjamas. The sun had just sunk below the horizon. To his annoyance, he realized that he really did have a headache. He briefly wondered if another vision would come, but none had come since a week before school had started. At least THAT was something positive. He collapsed onto his bed.

'Hey,' said Harry as he entered the dorm room. 'You okay?'

'Fine,' Ron said dully.

'Quidditch tryouts are Friday,' Harry said. 'Maybe you and me should have a fly with Katie tomorrow, just to get used to being out there together.'

'Sure,' said Ron, not caring for the moment about Quidditch.

'Ron, maybe you should just tell Hermione you fancy her and get it over with,' Harry said.

Ron sat up so fast he practically fell off the bed.

'WHAT?'

Harry rolled his eyes again. 'Oh for god's sake, Ron, don't tell me you haven't figured out yet that you fancy her.'

'That's...I...what the...I do NOT fancy Hermione!' Ron said, appalled.

'No, you just go spare every time she even mentions another bloke, you lose it when she writes to Krum and you act all miserable when she won't talk to you,' Harry said, pulling off his robes and his school jumper and unbuttoning his shirt.

'Yeah, well, we're friends, aren't we?' Ron said, his ears now very hot. 'Why shouldn't I be upset when she won't talk to me? And...and as her FRIEND I'm just looking out for her, you know. Those blokes she likes are prats and she should know about it. And Krum is a right loser. He can't even--'

'Pronounce her name,' said Harry, pulling on a pair of jeans. 'Oh no, you don't fancy her at all.'

'Look, Harry, I don't fancy Hermione, all right?' Ron said with a disbelieving laugh. He couldn't believe Harry would even suggest it. It was ridiculous. Not that Ron hadn't noticed Hermione had become very pretty and more filled out these days. But that was to be expected, wasn't it?

‘Sure you don’t,’ Harry said, in a maddening, I-know-something-you-don’t type of voice.

‘I DON’T!’ Ron shouted.

‘You don’t what?’ Seamus Finnigan asked as he and Dean Thomas came into dormitory.

‘Nothing,’ Ron said quickly, his ears still burning. He flashed a warning look at Harry, who simply grinned and shook his head.

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Friday couldn’t come soon enough for Ron. Having three Potions and Transfigurations lessons a week was turning out to be something of a nightmare. He liked McGonagall well enough--she was strict but always very fair--but the extra ninety minutes a week with Snape? Ron wasn’t sure he could cope. And then he thought about Harry and wondered how he must be feeling. Ron was beginning to think he should have just chosen Muggle Liaison as a career. All he would have had to take this year were a few easy classes, like Muggle Studies.

The day of Quidditch tryouts, at least, were bright and clear and cool. Harry, Katie, Ron and Andrew Kirke headed out to the Quidditch pitch at four-thirty that afternoon to change into their Quidditch robes. Then they gathered together in the Gryffindor tent.

‘So, ah,’ Harry began. ‘Welcome back, everyone. McGonagall gave me this captain job but I think we ought to all have a say in who joins up, yeah?’

‘Definitely,’ said Katie firmly, and Ron and Andrew nodded.

‘I, ah, wasn’t here at last year’s tryouts,’ Harry said, and he blushed at this, ‘but I liked Angelina’s idea of, you know, working with everyone to see if they meshed with the team as a whole. So let’s just go with that.’

They talked for another few minutes, Harry gaining a bit more confidence as he went on. Ron wondered why he wasn’t at all jealous of Harry for getting the captaincy. Of course Harry deserved it--he was easily the best Seeker since Ron’s own brother Charlie, and he’d been on the team since his first year, and he’d won plenty of matches for their house. Two years ago, Ron thought, I might have been jealous. Not anymore.

At five minutes to five they trooped outside, carrying their broomsticks. A thin layer of cloud had rolled in, just enough to obscure direct sunlight without affecting visibility.

A long line of students were milling around the pitch, some looking anxious, others eager. Ron saw Ginny at once, and she waved cheerfully at them. He was surprised to see Parvati Patil and Seamus Finnigan in the group as well.

‘I’m tryin’ for Beater,’ Seamus said with a grin. ‘Me mam encouraged me to go. Figure I’m pretty good at hitting things.’

The tryouts began. They started with the Chasers, of whom there were over a dozen. Ginny was easily the strongest one and Ron immediately put a vote in for his younger sister, hoping that Harry and the others went along, too. Several other students tried out, none of them brilliant, but then Parvati Patil joined in, and she proved to be a very capable flyer. Ron was surprised--he’d always figured Parvati as rather frivolous and completely uninterested in sport. Colin and Dennis Creevey were there. Harry told Ron Dennis would make a good Seeker if the spot was open, but poor Colin wasn’t much of a flyer.

The Beater tryouts were next, and it quickly became apparent that Seamus was indeed the strongest candidate there. He struck the Bludger hard, but his hits were accurate, unlike Colin Creevey (who apparently wanted to play Quidditch so badly that he was trying out for every position available), who kept sending his Bludgers at Ron.

After about two hours the try-outs ended. Harry thanked everyone and promised to post the results the following morning. He, Ron, Katie and Andrew gathered in the tent again to discuss their choices, but it seemed everyone was on the same page.

‘Ginny Weasley’s a definite,’ Harry said firmly. ‘She was the best we saw today. How about Parvati Patil?’ Everyone nodded their agreement. Seamus was named the other Beater, and the Gryffindors had their new Quidditch team.

‘First practice next Monday night, okay?’ Harry said, as they trooped off to the showers and to get changed.

The following morning they ate breakfast and agreed to visit Hagrid, who looked to be fully recovered from his rather awful second term of last year.

Fifteen minutes later they were inside Hagrid’s hut, drinking tea and trying to politely avoid another batch of his teeth-breaking rock cakes. Fang, Hagrid’s massive boarhound, attacked them all happily, drooling on their trousers.

‘Grea’ to be back ‘ere, it is,’ said Hagrid happily. ‘‘Bou’ thought las’ year was it fer me, with tha’ Umbridge woman an’ all. But Dumbledore sorted it all out. Grea’ man, Dumbledore.’ Hagrid sniffed and wiped his face with his enormous sleeve.

They passed a friendly hour with Hagrid, who reported that Grawp, his younger half-brother, was thus far enjoying life inside the forest, but that it had been hard to keep him away from the centaurs, who were still furious with Hagrid for bringing Grawp there in the first place.

‘Those centaurs know how to hold a grudge, don’t they?’ Ron said, shaking his head.

‘Are they still angry at Firenze?’ Hermione asked, taking a sip of tea.

‘Oh, yeah,’ said Hagrid. ‘Ron’s right’, centaurs don’t forget wrongdoing. Far as they’re concerned Firenze is a traitor. Feel bad for him, I do--not bein’ able to return to his home. But at least he’s got a safe place in the castle.’

‘Wonder how he’s getting on with Trelawney,’ Harry muttered. ‘Her being a fraud and him thinking humans are idiots.’

They talked a bit more and the subject turned to their upcoming Care of Magical Creatures lessons. Their first two lessons had been devoted to fire lizards, small fire-breathing reptiles that were positively benign by Hagrid’s standards. But their hearts sank when Hagrid gleefully promised them ‘an unforgettable year’ of lessons. That almost certainly meant Hagrid’s choices of magical creatures would range from the dangerous to the deadly.

They left around lunchtime, hungry (having turned down Hagrid’s rock cakes), and went back up to the castle for the afternoon meal, then returned outside afterward to take advantage of the fine weather. They sat under the beech tree near the lake, and Ron and Harry engaged in a lazy game of wizard chess while Hermione continued to read *Romeo and Juliet*.

‘So what’s so special about this Shakesboot bloke, anyway?’ Ron asked, as one of his knights smashed Harry’s pawn.

‘Shakespeare,’ Hermione corrected. ‘He’s just a wonderful poet, that’s all.’

‘Let me guess,’ said Ron, his eyes still fixed on the chess board. ‘He writes romantic mushy stuff that girls wish their boyfriends would recite to them.’ Harry chuckled.

‘That’s about right, Ron,’ Harry said, with a look on his face that suggested he was resigned to losing yet again.

‘The chances of a boy here talking as beautifully as Romeo does to Juliet are about equal with my chances of failing my Charms exam,’ said Hermione loftily.

‘Are you saying boys here aren’t poetic?’ Ron asked in mock indignation.

‘Yes, as a matter of fact, I am,’ said Hermione, returning to her book.

Harry rolled his eyes as Ron moved one a bishop over.

‘So what sort of stuff does Rodeo say?’ Ron asked, waiting for Harry to make the next move.

‘Romeo, and I’m not saying,’ said Hermione. ‘You’ll either laugh at it or you won’t understand it.’

‘We won’t laugh at it!’ Harry protested.

‘And we’re not stupid!’ Ron said hotly.

‘Well, all right,’ she said. ‘The most famous is just after Romeo and Juliet have met. They fall in love at first sight but their families are mortal enemies, so of course Romeo and Juliet are doomed. It’s all very beautiful and tragic--’

Ron gave a hearty snort and started to laugh out loud, but quickly shut up when Hermione shot him a contemptible look.

‘Anyway,’ she said, in a tone that showed her patience was wearing thin, ‘Romeo meets Juliet at a party thrown by her father--he sneaks in wearing a mask, of course, so he doesn’t get caught--and later on he sneaks over to Juliet’s balcony and sees her up there, and he gives this really famous soliloquy all about Juliet.’

‘A solilo-what?’ Ron asked.

‘So-lil-o-quy,’ Hermione pronounced. ‘It’s a monologue. And Romeo isn’t really trying to get Juliet’s attention, he’s just talking to himself.’

Harry and Ron exchanged looks.

‘This Romeo sounds like a right nutter,’ said Ron, as he check-mated Harry’s king. The king collapsed and broke apart into pieces.

‘Damn,’ Harry muttered.

‘So this Romeo bloke just stands around this bird’s window and talks to himself about her?’ Ron asked, sweeping up the chess pieces and putting them back into his bag. ‘And he says, what, how much he loves her or something?’

‘Yes, and how beautiful she is, and how he wishes she weren’t the daughter of his enemy,’ said Hermione, and a wistful, dreamy look came over her face. Ron and Harry exchanged looks again. Girls, they both thought.

‘So, let’s hear this,’ Ron said, sitting up and brushing grass off his trousers.

‘Okay,’ said Hermione, looking very pleased. She sat up as well and her hair, which she’d worn loose again today, caught the sunlight. She had golden streaks in her hair that he’d never noticed before. She’d worn a skirt today and was sitting daintily in it, but as she shifted the skirt hiked up a bit, exposing just a bit of her thigh. Ron’s eyes strayed there, then back up to her shiny hair, then back to her leg.

‘What?’ said Hermione sharply. Ron looked up at her and his ears went pink.

‘Uh, nothing,’ he said, but he could have sworn he heard Harry snigger softly behind him.

‘Go on, Hermione,’ said Harry.

‘Right,’ said Hermione, who was still looking at Ron curiously. She cleared her throat, brushed her hair out of her eyes, and read.

'But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?

'It is the East, and Juliet is the sun.

'Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,

'Who is already sick and pale with grief

'That thou, her maid, art more fair than she.'

There was a long silence in which Harry and Ron stared at her. Ron had no idea what she had just read, but he assumed it must be very romantic, judging by the starry look in Hermione's eyes. To him it sounded like a bunch of rubbish. He looked at Harry again, and they burst into laughter.

'I KNEW you'd laugh!' she said angrily.

'Come on, Hermione,' Harry said, sitting up and leaning against the trunk of the beech tree. 'That stuff is...it's lurid. Sounds like something Lockhart would say.'

'It's beautiful!' Hermione said indignantly. 'He's comparing Juliet to the sun, don't you see? And how her beauty outdoes everyone else's, at least in his eyes.'

'It's sick,' Ron said. 'What's all that rot about killing the moon? What's that mean? I mean, if a bloke likes a girl why can't he just tell her does and tell her she's pretty or something?'

'Oh, Ron!' Hermione huffed in exasperation. 'Telling a girl she's pretty or that you like her is so...so common. Everyone does that!'

'Yeah, well,' Ron said, feeling his face get hot again. 'I'd never tell the girl I like that Shakespoo stuff. It would sound really stupid.'

'Coming from you, maybe,' Hermione snapped.

'What's that supposed to mean?' said Ron defensively. 'Look here, if I like a girl, I'll tell her, straight up. Hi, whoever you are, I think you're great and I fancy you and let's go out. None of this frou-frou rubbish about killing moons and what.'

'It is not "frou-frou rubbish!"' Hermione protested hotly.

'Hey!' Harry shouted. 'You two just made up. Do you think you can manage not to row for at least the next few days? I was rather liking the peace and quiet.'

Ron and Hermione both started to protest, then stopped. Ron bit his lip and felt his ears go red. Hermione blushed.

'Sorry,' Ron mumbled.

'Sorry,' said Hermione, looking at her hands.

‘It’s okay,’ said Harry, shaking his head and rolling his eyes, but his mouth was curved in a grin. ‘So, Ron, you like someone, do you?’

Ron’s and Hermione’s heads both snapped up and they looked at Harry sharply. Ron glanced at Hermione, then back at Harry.

‘What?’ Ron was taken aback. ‘No,’ he said quickly. ‘I mean, I was just speaking hypothetically.’ His ears were burning. He glanced at Hermione, who still looked disgruntled but very pretty nonetheless, and looked away.

‘Right,’ said Harry, and Ron got the distinct impression Harry didn’t believe him.

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## *Chapter Eight: The Second Argument*

The first Gryffindor Quidditch practice went off well, Ron thought. Seamus was a good beater and Kirke must have been practicing all summer, for he had markedly improved. Ginny and Parvati proved to be excellent Chasers, and Ron felt a swell of pride at well how his little sister flew, although he wished he had the money to buy her a decent broom. As he stripped off his Quidditch things at the end of practice and jumped in the shower, he made a mental note to owl Fred and George and ask them to consider buying Ginny a new broom for Christmas.

He and Harry headed back up to the common room, grateful to find the fire roaring and their favourite chairs empty. It was past ten o’clock by now and the only people in the common room were Hermione and a few second years, all of them doing homework.

‘Hi,’ said Hermione absently, not looking up from her Charms essay. ‘How was practice?’

‘Excellent,’ Harry said, sounding and looking hearty for the first time in weeks. ‘The team is really strong this year. Ginny’s the best Chaser I’ve seen since Angelina. And Parvati’s a real surprise. I had no idea she could fly so well.’

‘Seamus is pretty good, too,’ Ron added, flopping down into his favourite chair. ‘Not as good as Fred and George, but he has a strong arm and good aim.’

‘Mmm,’ said Hermione vaguely, pausing to add something to her essay.

‘Are you even listening to us?’ Ron asked, feeling slightly indignant.

‘What?’ Hermione asked, looking up. ‘Oh, sorry. I’m just on a roll here.’

‘I’ll say,’ Ron said, noting the length of her parchment. ‘More like the third roll. You know, Hermione, Flitwick did only ask for a single roll.’

‘Yes, well,’ said Hermione, ‘I like to cover all the bases.’

Ron and Harry looked at each other and rolled their eyes. The small group of second years all yawned and went up to their dormitories. Ron and Harry were just getting comfortable in their chairs and pulling out their own homework when the portrait hole opened. Ginny clambered through, followed by Bill. 'Bill!' Ron said, standing up like a shot. 'I mean, uh...Professor Weasley...'

Bill laughed. 'Off-hours it's just Bill, okay?'

'What are you doing here?' Ron demanded, in a voice rather sharper than he intended.

'I need to talk to Harry again,' Bill said, nodding to Harry. Harry blinked in surprise.

'Uh, okay,' he said, clearly confused. Ron and Hermione made a move to get up.

'You two can stick around,' said Bill. 'And you, Ginny. This concerns all of you.'

Ginny took a seat next to Hermione on the sofa, and Ron and Harry slowly sat back in their chairs as Bill came around to face them, taking a chair of his own next to Harry.

'Harry, I know that last year you started Occlumency lessons with Professor Snape,' Bill said. 'But you didn't finish them.'

Harry's eyes flashed dangerously and Ron braced himself for an angry outburst, but instead Harry simply swallowed hard and nodded.

'It appears that Dumbledore is insisting you start up Occlumency lessons again,' Bill said in a sober voice.

'No,' Harry said flatly. 'There is no way I'm going back to working with Snape, get me? No way, no how. You can tell Dumbledore--'

'I will be teaching you,' Bill interrupted, not at all ruffled by Harry's sharp tone.

'Wh-what?' Harry stammered.

'What?' Ron, Ginny and Hermione all said at once.

'Dumbledore has asked me to continue your Occlumency lessons,' Bill said easily. 'And he has authorized me to teach you Legilimency as well. Dumbledore suspects that with each passing day that you're here in school, your mental connection with...Voldemort...is growing.'

They all stared at Bill, clearly impressed that he, too, was saying Voldemort's name out loud.

'I don't see how,' Harry said, after a moment. 'In fact, the whole time I was at the Dursleys nothing happened. No visions, my scar barely hurt at all. I mean, it prickles a bit all the time now, I guess, but nothing out of the ordinary.'

'Dumbledore believes that Voldemort has been lying low and trying to regroup. The

events at the Ministry have put a big crimp in his plans, to say the least. He hasn't been active for these past few months because he's trying to come up with a Plan B. Dumbledore believes--and I'm inclined to believe this, too--that Voldemort is just biding his time and waiting for an opening. You're still at risk, Harry.'

Harry's eyes flashed again. 'Yeah, I know,' he said, sounding angry.

'This isn't just about protecting you, Harry,' Bill interrupted again. 'It's about training you to see into his mind, too. Your connection with him has its uses, remember? If it hadn't been for you our dad would have died from that snake attack last year.'

'Wait a minute,' Ron said. 'You're saying Harry has to learn how to...how to read Vol-Voldemort's mind?'

'In a manner of speaking, yes,' said Bill, leaning back in his chair.

'Do I get a say in this?' Harry asked, his anger rising. 'Maybe I don't want to go poking around in Voldemort's brain, you know. It sort of hurts like hell when it's happened in the past. And what if he pulls something like he did last year? He tricked me into going to the Ministry that night, remember? He could do it again. He's stronger than me. Dumbledore is off his nut, Bill, and you can tell him I said that. No way could I sneak around in Voldemort's head without him knowing.'

'You can if you learn Legilimency,' Bill said. 'Look, Harry, I know this isn't easy for you.'

'Do you?' Harry asked sarcastically.

'Yeah, I do,' Bill snapped, his cool demeanour faded. 'I'm not saying I know how you feel or what you've been through. You didn't ask for this, but you can't escape it. And I'm sorry about that, but I'm also here to help you learn how to deal with it, okay?'

'What does this have to do with us?' Ginny asked in a small voice.

'All of you are going to be learning Occlumency this year,' said Bill, looking at her. 'With the Death Eaters regrouping and the ones in prison ready to bust out any second we all have to prepare ourselves in every way possible. Physical defence isn't enough.'

'But why single me out, then?' Harry asked, sounding annoyed.

'Because,' Bill explained, sounding patient again, 'like Snape said, the regular rules don't apply to you. For Legilimency or Occlumency to work on most people there has to be eye contact, but not where you and Voldemort are concerned.'

'I don't like this,' Ron said nervously. 'Come on, Bill, Harry's got enough on his plate, don't you think? I mean, bad enough Voldemort wants to kill him. Why make him go through this?'

‘Because,’ Harry said sadly, ‘if I can get into his head I can tell the Order what his plans are, maybe help head him off somehow. But I have to be able to do it so that he doesn’t know.’

‘So Harry has to act as some sort of...telepathic spy?’ Hermione asked, speaking up for the first time and sounding very scared.

‘Something like that,’ said Bill.

‘Since when did you become good at this stuff, anyway?’ Ron asked suspiciously.

‘It was part of my Curse-Breaker training for Gringott’s,’ said Bill. ‘And just so you know, Aurors have to learn it, too. So you might as well accept it if that’s what you want to do once you’re out of here.’

‘Great,’ said Ron grimly.

‘I’m not going to lie to any of you,’ Bill said. ‘This is some of the most dangerous stuff a wizard or witch can do, and some of the most painful. And most people who become skilled Legilimens or Occlumens wouldn’t be able to resist Voldemort or his best Death Eaters.’

Harry sighed and covered his face with his hands, and Ron felt a surge of sympathy.

Harry pulled his hands down from his face and looked squarely at Bill.

‘I’ll do it,’ said Harry. ‘Not like I have much of a choice, anyway.’

‘Good,’ said Bill, but he didn’t smile. ‘I’m going to start taking up lessons in Occlumency later on in the term but I want to get started with you right away, Harry. Give you a leg up.’

‘Okay,’ Harry said dully, his happiness at the successful Quidditch practice now completely evaporated.

Bill nodded and said nothing else. He stood up and without a word, strode from the common room.

Ron, Hermione and Ginny didn’t watch him go; their eyes were fixed on Harry, who was staring into the fire. Ron wondered whether Harry was wishing that Sirius would appear there, as he had so many times in the past.

‘Are you...all right, Harry?’ Hermione asked timidly.

‘Fine,’ Harry said shortly. He looked around at them. ‘Well, at least I won’t have to work with Snape.’ He forced a laugh that turned into a dejected, exhausted sigh.

‘I’m turning in,’ he announced, not looking at any of them. ‘See you in the morning.’

‘Okay,’ Ron said. Hermione started to say something but Ron shot her a look, and she closed her mouth.

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The second week of term proved to be even busier than the first, and Ron was beginning to appreciate that even without O.W.Ls to worry about this year, he had quite a full plate.

Harry, who thankfully had a slightly less manic captaining style than Oliver Wood or Angelina, nonetheless insisted on hard Quidditch practices three times a week. The weather had thus far been mild and dry so there was no getting out of the practice sessions.

Homework was no less onerous this year than last, either. With the additional Potions, Transfiguration, Charms and Defence Against the Dark Arts lessons, Ron, Harry and Hermione found themselves spending every free minute studying, reading, writing essays, or practicing charms and spells. Their Potions classwork became more and more difficult, but Snape seemed to have chosen a different tack to take with Harry this year. Instead of badgering him, Snape all but ignored him, which was probably just as well, because Harry stared daggers at Snape half the time, and Ron was worried Harry might do or say something stupid to get himself thrown out of the class.

Then there were Harry’s Occlumency lessons, which Bill had started up right away. Harry took them twice a week, just after his last lesson of the day and before dinner. He wasn’t saying a word to Ron or anyone else about how his lessons were going; he merely showed up at dinner looking pale and tired, and Hermione had to nag him to eat something. Ron and Hermione both wondered briefly whether Harry might actually crack under the strain, but Harry seemed to work out his aggression in Quidditch practices, which he approached with a single-minded ferocity that made Ron feel slightly uneasy. He was loath to pester Harry about anything, though, despite Hermione’s urgings to do so. Harry would talk when he was good and ready and not before.

Bill, meanwhile, had proven to be as strong a teacher as his initial first impression. In just two weeks he had drilled them on Stunning Spells, Silencing Charms, Impediment Jinxes, Total Body Binds, Reductor Curses, Jelly-Legs Jinxes, Disarming Spells, and announced that work on Patronuses would begin in the third week. Ron learned from Harry that Bill had asked Harry about everything they had covered in last year’s D.A. meetings, and that Harry would be assisting in the Patronus lessons, using boggarts. Bill was also interested in Harry’s ability to resist the Imperius Curse and planned to work that into lessons, as well.

Bill impressed Ron and Harry with his knowledge and abilities, but nobody was nearly so impressed with Bill as the girls in the school. Nearly every girl in the sixth-year class was showing up to class ten or fifteen minutes early in the hopes of securing seats in the front row. Every day Ron heard girls whispering and giggling in the corridors about the ‘gorgeous new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher.’ Parvati and Lavender declared that between taking Divination classes with Firenze and Dark Arts lessons with Bill, that this year was by far the best year ever, and that

they hoped Dumbledore would continue to hire 'brilliant teachers who also happened to be fantastic-looking.'

'It's not fair,' Seamus grumbled to Ron after a Dark Arts lesson on Friday. 'When is Dumbledore going to hire a great-lookin' woman teacher for us blokes to gawk at? If I have to listen to Lavender drone on about your brother one more second I think I'll go mad.'

'Thank God Bill is Ginny's brother,' Dean Thomas said vehemently. 'At least I don't have to hear that stuff from her.'

Ron resisted the urge to step on Dean's foot, having forgotten until that moment that he was dating Ginny.

He better not be messing with her or I'll rearrange his face, thought Ron darkly.

On top of this were Ron and Hermione's prefect duties. Hermione had decided that the fifth years needed detailed study schedules in preparation for their O.W.Ls, and Ron was only too happy to let her take on this project, which she managed to complete in no time even with her numerous subjects (she was still taking more subjects than Harry and Ron) and her continued knitting of hats and socks for house-elves. Nobody had ever told Hermione that Dobby had taken every single piece of clothing she had ever knitted, and that the continued presence of house-elves was not, as Hermione thought, because Dumbledore kept hiring new ones to replace the ones who had left thanks to being set free by her, but because the original house elves were still there and simply refusing to clean the Gryffindor common room anymore, leaving the job entirely to Dobby.

Eddie Carmichael, meanwhile, insisted that all the prefects have their first meeting before September finished, but the scheduling proved to be a problem, considering that Ron, Katie and Malfoy all had Quidditch practices to attend. At last they wound up squeezing it in during a lunch hour in the second week.

The meeting was relatively painless and Ron felt his attention drift, until the last ten minutes, when Eddie announced that he had received permission from Dumbledore to organize a Halloween ball.

'It'll be a masked ball,' he said. 'You know, like they did in the old days. Costumes required. Lots of food, of course. Dancing. We're going to try for the Weird Sisters but I hear they're touring the continent so that might fall through. If so, no sweat, Lee Jordan's offered to come back and D.J. it for us. In any case, I'd like all the prefects to go, you know. Set an example for everyone. The younger kids are invited but they'll have to turn in by ten. We'll escort them up and then we can come back to the party.'

'Wait, wait, wait,' said Andrew Goldstein, sounding annoyed. 'We have to go to this thing, in costumes?'

'Well, it's not REQUIRED,' Eddie said in a tone that indicated that it might as well be. 'I mean, if you can't find a costume you should still show up. But come on, it'll be Halloween. Half the fun is wearing a costume.'

Speak for yourself, Ron thought darkly, wondering just what on earth he was going to wear to this event. Eddie talked over a few more things, which Ron barely listened to as he hated the sound of Eddie's voice, and then the meeting was over.

He stood up, stretched, and started to leave when he noticed that Eddie had pulled Hermione aside. Ron hung back, letting the other prefects and Katie pass him by (Malfoy bumped into him on purpose, but Ron ignored him).

Eddie was standing very close to Hermione. Doesn't think much of personal space, does he? thought Ron, trying to look casual, like he was waiting for Hermione instead of trying to eavesdrop on their conversation. He wished he had a pair of Fred and George's Extendable Ears.

Hermione laughed softly at something Eddie said, and blushed, and Ron clenched his fists. Then she was nodding, and Eddie was beaming at her, looking more like Lockhart (although his features were nothing like Lockhart's) than ever.

'What did he want?' Ron demanded in a sharper voice than he intended.

'Oh, nothing,' said Hermione, looking pink in the cheeks.

'Nothing,' Ron repeated, trying very hard not to get angry. 'Then how come he pulled you aside for five minutes? He couldn't say what he wanted in front of me, that doesn't sound like nothing.'

'If you must know,' Hermione said in an exasperated voice, 'he asked me to go to the Halloween ball with him.'

'WHAT?' Ron's voice was so loud it echoed down the corridor, which was thankfully empty as most of the students were in the Great Hall eating lunch or out on the grounds, enjoying the good weather.

'Ron, keep your voice down!' Hermione hissed, looking alarmed and annoyed. 'At least try to act like a prefect.'

'Well, what did you say?' Ron demanded. Let her have said no, he thought desperately.

'I said yes,' Hermione said, not looking at him.

'WHAT?' Ron's voice echoed even louder in the hall, and a few students who had just entered the castle stopped and looked at him.

'You're going,' Ron said, in a low voice that was shaking with rage, 'to the ball with that...that...strutting PEACOCK?'

'He is not a strutting peacock!' Hermione snapped.

'What's he going to dress up as, Gregory the Smarmy?' Ron hissed, his face hot with

anger. 'Or maybe Leo the Lascivious, that sounds like more his speed.'

'Ron!' Hermione said furiously, her own voice shaking now. 'You either stop acting like an idiot right now or I'm not speaking to you ever again.'

'I can't BELIEVE you're going to a ball with that prat,' Ron stormed, his voice rising again.

'And I can't believe you're behaving like a child,' Hermione shot back. 'No, wait, yes I can!'

'At least I'm not acting like a...a stupid...GIRL!' he spluttered, making no effort to restrain his temper.

'I am NOT a stupid girl!' Hermione shrieked, now completely forgetting to lower her own voice. 'What's it to you, anyway? You're not my boyfriend! It's none of your bloody business who I go out with!'

The words hit Ron like a long, hot needle in his chest. He was so stung by them that when he opened his mouth to retort, nothing would come out. And then, to his horror, Hermione's eyes filled with tears.

'Wha--?' he said dumbly, completely horrified with himself for having made her cry again.

'Oh, dammit!' she cried, and before Ron could say or do anything, she took off down the hall at a run, her hair flying behind her.

Ron stood there, his anger forgotten, the hollow, constricting feeling in his chest engulfing him so heavily that he did not even have the presence of mind to snarl at the small crowd of second years who were standing in the corridor, staring at him in fear and awe.

Author's Note: Morgan le Fey is just one version of the name. In Webster's New World Dictionary, she is Morgan Le Fay or Le Fey. In Malory's *La Morte D'Arthur* she is Morgan le Fay. She is Morgaine in Marian Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*; Morgane la Fée is a modern French version of the name. Her Latin name is Fata Morgana. Her Celtic name is Morrigain, and it means "sorceress" or "queen of incubi." "Fey" refers, of course, to fairies. It also means "fated" (Fata), and is a synonym for such words as puckish (Puck, in Shakespeare, is a fairy), whimsical, eccentric, or visionary.

Chapter Nine: An Escape and a Reconciliation

Ron stomped back to the common room in a fury with himself. For the second time in as many weeks, he had brought Hermione to tears. As angry as he was with himself, he was also starting to wonder just why Hermione was so weepy this year. Had Cho Chang infected her with some sort of crying disease?

He was grateful not to find Hermione in the common room, but a moment later Ginny, who was sitting in his own favourite chair by the fire, approached him with a scolding look on her face.

‘Hermione just came in a few minutes ago, crying,’ Ginny said accusingly. ‘She ran upstairs and slammed the door. You had another row, did you?’

‘Yeah,’ said Ron harshly. ‘Look, Ginny, I feel bad enough, okay? Don’t lecture me right now.’

‘Fine,’ said Ginny. ‘But sooner or later you’re going to have to accept your feelings for her and tell her, because you’re making yourself and her really miserable, and it’s starting to drive me a bit mad.’

‘What are you on about?’ Ron demanded, shocked. ‘What feelings?’

‘Oh, God, Ron,’ Ginny said, rolling her eyes and throwing her hands up, ‘you are so thick! When are you going to wake up?’

‘What are you TALKING about?’ Ron yelled, now furious.

‘I’m off to class,’ said Ginny, throwing her older brother a dirty look. She was just exiting toward the portrait hole when Harry climbed through.

‘Hey, Ginny,’ he said, throwing her a smile. He glanced at Ron, then back at Ginny.

‘Uh oh,’ he said shrewdly, noting Ginny’s exasperated expression. ‘Ron and Hermione--’

‘Yeah, *again*,’ said Ginny. ‘He’s hopeless, Harry.’

‘I’m RIGHT HERE,’ Ron snapped.

‘You talk to him,’ Ginny went on, as if Ron hadn’t said a word. ‘Either that or hit him over the head with something.’

Harry gave a nervous chuckle. 'Yeah, well, if I do that and he pounds me to a pulp can I blame you?'

'Whatever,' said Ginny airily, and she disappeared through the portrait hole.

'What's up?' Harry asked, turning to Ron.

'What's up?' Ron bellowed, now beside himself. 'What's up is that I had another row with Hermione and you two are acting like real gits to me for no reason at all. That's what's up.'

'Sorry,' said Harry, taking a step toward him. 'Look, Ron, what happened with Hermione this time?'

'Carmichael happened,' Ron said in disgust. 'That flashy, smooth-talking arse of a Head Boy asked Hermione to the Halloween ball and she went and said yes. Can you believe it?'

'What Halloween ball?' Harry asked. Ron explained what happened in the Prefects Meeting.

'So she's going with Carmichael,' Harry said, shaking his head. 'Guess you need to find yourself a date.'

'Who says I'm going?' Ron said sullenly.

'Oh, come on, Ron, you have to go,' said Harry.

'Yeah?' said Ron darkly, flopping into the seat Ginny had vacated. 'Well, who'd want to go with me? Padma Patil doesn't have fond memories of me.'

'Luna Lovegood would go with you in a shot,' said Harry, smiling.

'Be serious,' Ron snapped. 'That girl gives me the creeps.'

'She's not so bad,' Harry said quietly.

'You go with her, then,' said Ron. 'Dammit. I can't believe Hermione said yes to that git.'

'Maybe you should have asked her first,' Harry suggested. 'You know, like Hermione told you to do in fourth year.'

'Carmichael asked her right after the meeting!' Ron protested. 'What was I supposed to do, leap across the room, knock him out and ask her?'

'Maybe,' Harry said, smiling.

'Dammit,' Ron said again, 'because of that stupid meeting I had to miss lunch. Talk

about adding insult to injury.'

'I brought you a sandwich,' Harry said, opening his bag and pulling out a huge sandwich. 'You can stuff your face on the way to next lesson.'

'Right,' Ron said glumly, taking the sandwich and unwrapping it. He ate quickly, picked up his school bag, and followed Harry out of the portrait hole to their Potions lesson, his stomach roiling.

Hermione was once again not speaking to Ron. Ron, however, was making no effort to pursue her. True, he had made her cry again, but what was wrong with her, anyway? When had she gotten so overly sensitive? And in any case, it wasn't like she hadn't hurt him. If anything, she should be apologizing to him at least as much as he ought to be apologizing to her.

Ron carried this thought through Quidditch practice, and was heartened to see that he performed well. By the time the Gryffindor Quidditch team all returned to the common room, Ron was exhausted and ready to fall into bed.

He was halfway to the boys' staircase when Ginny pulled him aside.

'What?' Ron asked irritably. 'I'm tired, Gin, I want to turn in.'

'Hermione's birthday is next week, remember?' Ginny whispered. Ron looked around and was both relieved and disgruntled to see that Hermione wasn't there.

'Yeah, so?' Ron asked.

'Well, it's her sixteenth birthday,' Ginny said. 'I thought we'd give her a party.'

'That's brilliant, Ginny,' said Ron sarcastically. 'In case you hadn't noticed, Hermione's not talking to me.'

'Yeah, well, you can fix that, you know,' said Ginny easily. 'Unless you don't want to fix it.'

'I do,' said Ron defensively.

'Well, get her something nice as a present and I'm sure she'll forgive you,' said Ginny.

'And what if I don't want to forgive her?' asked Ron. 'She wasn't exactly nice to me, either.'

'Ron,' said Ginny, rolling her eyes.

'Yeah, all right,' Ron conceded. 'Fine. But if you want to plan a party that's your business. I'm too busy with stuff as it is.'

‘No problem,’ said Ginny, holding up a placatory hand. ‘Just make sure you get her something good.’

‘Right,’ Ron said, already walking up the boys’ staircase. When he entered the room he saw that Harry, Dean, Seamus and Neville were already asleep. Grateful not to have to talk to anyone else, he pulled off his clothes and robes and put on pyjamas, then crawled wearily into bed, falling asleep almost the moment his head hit the pillow.

Ron was dreaming. He was flying on Harry’s Firebolt trying to catch a falling Hermione, but every time he got under her to catch her, she seemed to disappear and re-appear somewhere else. She was laughing in a high, shrill voice that sent a chill down his spine.

The laughter went on and on and as Ron’s eyes fluttered open, he saw that it was still dark, and that somebody was laughing out loud in the dorm room.

He jerked his head over to Harry’s bed and saw him writhing on his back, the sheets twisted around his legs. Harry’s eyes were closed and his mouth was open and laughing a blood-curdling laugh. Ron shot out of bed and raced over to Harry’s side as Neville, Dean and Seamus began to wake up.

‘Harry!’ Ron yelled, grabbing Harry by the shoulders. ‘Harry, wake up!’

‘What’s wrong with him?’ Dean asked fearfully, now fully awake.

Ron ignored him and shook Harry’s shoulders. ‘Harry, wake up!’ he repeated urgently.

Harry’s eyes snapped open. He looked up at Ron and jerked back, hitting his head against the headboard.

‘Harry, it’s me!’ Ron cried. ‘It’s Ron!’

Harry was ashen-faced and covered in a cold sweat and his hand was pressed against his scar. He was breathing very hard and looked as though he might vomit.

‘What’s wrong?’ Ron repeated, sitting down on Harry’s bed. ‘You had a nightmare?’

Harry shook his head. ‘It’s...It’s him,’ he said in a strangled voice.

‘Vol-Voldemort?’ Ron whispered. The other boys gave audible gasps.

‘He’s happy about something again,’ Harry said, his green eyes huge with fear.

‘What about?’ Ron asked, ignoring the presence of Dean, Seamus and Neville.

‘I dunno,’ Harry said, shaking his head. ‘I can’t...I can’t tell exactly. But...but the last time he was this pleased was last year. When those Death Eaters broke out of Azkaban.’

Ron, Dean and Seamus stared at him in horrified silence, but Neville gave a kind of choked whimper.

‘We’d better check The Daily Prophet tomorrow,’ Harry said grimly.

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Harry, Ron and Neville did not fall back to sleep that night; Dean and Seamus fell asleep only when it became clear that Harry would not answer any of their questions.

The next morning was cool and dry and the bright sunshine seemed to Ron to be a cruel irony, considering what had happened the night before. He and Harry dressed quickly and raced down to the Great Hall for breakfast. It was early and the hall was mostly empty.

Harry and Ron saw Hermione sitting at the Gryffindor table. She had a bowl of porridge in front of her and was staring down at something. Her face was white.

‘Hermione,’ Harry said, taking the lead (Ron wasn’t sure she’d even pay attention to him). He and Ron sat down across from her. ‘Something happened last night. My scar hurt and--’

He broke off when he saw Hermione’s face. She looked up at them and her lower lip was trembling. Her face was like chalk.

‘Hermione, what’s wrong?’ Harry asked, but Hermione couldn’t seem to speak. She looked down again, and Ron saw that she was reading her copy of *The Daily Prophet*. He couldn’t read the article upside-down but he was able to discern the headline: **DEATH EATERS ESCAPE AZKABAN.**

Hermione wasn’t looking at the article, though. She was gazing at the photographs of the Death Eaters; only four were on the front page, but Ron discerned them at once. Lucius Malfoy, Augustus Rookwood, Bellatrix Lestrange, and Antonin Dolohov. It was at Dolohov’s photograph that Hermione was staring. Dolohov had an insolent, smug expression on his face. Hermione’s whole body started to tremble as she gazed at Dolohov’s face. Then suddenly she stood up, knocking over her glass of orange juice. She picked up her books, climbed over the bench, and fled the dining room.

‘Hermione!’ Ron called after her, very worried. ‘Should we go after her?’ he added to Harry, who had already snatched up the paper and was scanning it.

‘Let her be for now,’ Harry said. ‘Look at this.’ Ron nodded but his eyes travelled to where Hermione had just been sitting. Something about seeing Dolohov’s moving photograph had spooked her. Ron remembered that it was Dolohov who had given her the curse that had nearly killed her.

Harry, meanwhile, began to read the front-page article.

### *DEATH EATERS ESCAPE AZKABAN*

*Two Aurors killed, eight wounded in flight*

*Ten Death Eaters, supporters and followers of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, attempted escape from Azkaban prison in what is perhaps the deadliest and most violent prison break in Azkaban's history. Two Aurors, among over 20 who have been working as guards since the previous Azkaban guards deserted their posts last year, were killed in a bloody melee that also left six Death Eaters and eight other Aurors gravely wounded. The wounded Death Eaters have been taken to St. Mungo's Hospital where they are being treated under heavy guard. Spokespeople for Cornelius Fudge, the embattled Minister of Magic, have refused to comment on the details surrounding the escape, except to assert that all ten Death Eaters were involved in an attack at the Ministry of Magic last spring that included He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named himself. Several wizards and witches, including six students of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, were gravely injured in the attack, and the notorious murderer Sirius Black was killed.*

"He WASN'T a murderer," Harry said angrily, through gritted teeth. "You stupid bastards." Ron put a hand on his shoulder, and they both continued to read.

*The chief Auror in the Auror Office at the Ministry, Kingsley Shacklebolt, has been granted permission by Minister Fudge to declare a state of emergency. In addition, Shacklebolt has asked all Aurors and Curse Breakers to put in extra shifts, on a rotating basis, until the Death Eaters are caught and/or killed. Shacklebolt has also been granted a special budget to increase and accelerate the recruiting and training of new Aurors.*

*In the meantime the Ministry of Magic has issued a cautionary statement to the wizarding community of Britain to be on the look-out for the four escaped Death Eaters who managed to survive and escape the brutal battle at Azkaban. Their names are as follows: Lucius Malfoy, Bellatrix Lestrange, Antonin Dolohov, and Augustus Rookwood. Everyone must assume that these four persons are extremely dangerous. The Ministry urges everyone to exercise extreme caution in their daily activities.*

*The names of the Aurors killed and injured in the prison escape will be released after their families have been notified.*

'It's started,' Harry said. Ron sank back in his seat, no longer hungry.

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The talk of the school that Tuesday was of nothing but the escaped Death Eaters. The first years seemed to be the only students who weren't all that interested in it, perhaps because they were too young to truly understand the danger, and in any case, they hadn't been at Hogwarts the past two years, when so many terrible things (most of them to Harry) had happened.

Hermione would not speak to Ron. Only yesterday Ron would have felt slighted, but today, seeing the look of fear on Hermione's face and remembering her reaction to Dolohov's photo, he felt nothing but worry for her. And, as the day went on, Ron noticed that Hermione wasn't just refusing to talk to him, but to pretty much everyone. For the first time in his memory Hermione did not raise her hand in lessons, even though Ron was quite sure she knew every question posed by the teachers. By the time they got to their Defence Against the Dark Arts lesson, Hermione had barely said two words in class at all, except during Charms, to utter incantations.

The class quieted down and Bill stood up.

'I'm sure all of you have heard the news this morning,' he said in a grave voice. 'Before any of you start to panic, let me assure you that Hogwarts is the safest place you all could be right now. That said, I think it's time we focused on taking our defensive practice to the next level. Today we start on the Patronus charm. Most of you have some experience with this but I want it to become second nature to all of you. It's one thing to cast a fully formed Patronus in a classroom; something else to do it when you're being chased by Dementors.'

The lesson was the most gruelling yet. Bill had brought several boggarts with him, and Harry was asked to assist. Malfoy glared daggers at Harry through the whole class. By the end of the lesson Ron--covered in sweat and breathing hard from the exertions of working the charm over and over again--produced a fully formed Patronus, a bear. He was so pleased with himself that he couldn't keep himself from shouting when the bear finally appeared out of the end of his wand. It opened its mouth and gave a silent roar, then gambolled away and vanished into a silver mist.

'Wow,' said Neville, impressed (his Patronus was a rabbit). 'How'd you get that one, Ron?'

'Dunno,' said Ron, himself a bit confused. He wasn't aware of having any special affection for bears that he could remember.

'Maybe you're thinking about your teddy bear,' Harry joked. 'You know, the one Fred turned into a big spider.'

'That's not funny,' said Ron, shuddering at the thought.

With Quidditch practices, lessons and prefect duties, Ron's days were so full that by the end of the evening he barely had the energy for homework. The tension that had filled the school since the escape of the Death Eaters hadn't helped. Several students had, in a kind of panic, taken to accidentally setting off hexes and jinxes in the

hallways, inadvertently hitting other students. Madam Pomfrey declared on several occasions that she had never seen the hospital wing so busy for so many stupid reasons.

On top of this, Ron was stumped about what to get Hermione for her birthday. She still wasn't talking to him, but lately she had been avoiding Harry and Ginny as well. Whenever Harry questioned her, she would answer that she had been in the library. Ron wondered if in fact she was spending more time with Eddie Carmichael, but scratched that idea almost at once. Every time Hermione had been around Carmichael she had a kind of happy glow around her, but all week she had been tense and silent, strung so tightly, Ron thought, that if she were a rubber band she'd snap.

Ginny gave up on the idea of a party. 'She's a bit too weirded out by the Death Eater thing, I think. But I still think we should have something quiet and small, you know. Informal.'

'Yeah, but what do I get her?' Ron asked Ginny for what had to be the fifteenth time.

'Get her something she'll really like,' was always the answer.

'That's helpful,' said Ron. Two days before Hermione's birthday Ron was still without a gift, when suddenly it hit him.

Ron pulled Dean Thomas aside after their Herbology lesson. 'Dean, you think you can help me out?'

'What's up?' Dean asked, looking slightly apprehensive, most likely wondering if Ron was going to grill him about dating his younger sister.

'Well, uh, I don't know how to get Hermione's birthday present,' Ron said, feeling his face get very hot.

Dean smirked. Ron hurried on. 'That is, I know what I want to get her but not where to get it. Your dad, he owns a bookshop, yeah?'

'Yeah,' said Dean. 'Rare books, used books. That sort of thing. The shop's in London.'

'Right,' said Ron, wishing Dean would stop smirking at him. 'So, uh, would this shop have any Shakespit stuff?'

'Shakespeare?' Dean said. 'Sure. Tons of that stuff. You were thinking of the sonnets?'

'The what?'

'The sonnets,' Dean repeated. 'Bunch of poems he wrote. Most of them are about love and stuff. They're okay. Hermione's into Shakespeare?'

'Yeah, big time,' said Ron. 'You think she'd like a book of those sod-its?'

‘Sonnets,’ Dean said, laughing. ‘Yeah, she might. But you’d want to get her a good one. You know, leather-bound edition or something like that. You want me to owl my dad?’

‘Yeah,’ said Ron, relieved. ‘Yeah. But...but tell him...nothing too expensive. You know.’

Dean nodded. ‘Right. I’ll do it now.’

‘Thanks,’ said Ron, suddenly not quite so put out that Dean was dating and probably snogging his little sister.

‘Hey, what’d you want with Dean?’ Ginny asked suspiciously a moment later.

‘What?’ Ron asked. ‘Oh, he’s just helping me get a gift for Hermione.’

‘Uh huh,’ said Ginny. ‘You promise you haven’t been grilling him about me? Not getting all big brother protective on me, are you?’

‘I promise,’ said Ron. ‘But he’d better watch himself all the same.’

‘Right,’ said Ginny sarcastically. ‘What fun, having TWO big brothers around.’

Hermione’s birthday arrived on a cold, wet Saturday. Dean’s father had come through for Ron, sending him a rather small but beautifully bound leather edition of Shakespeare sonnets. Ron put several Galleons in a bag and sent Pigwidgeon-who was thrilled to finally have a delivery-off to London.

Ron flipped through the book and read a few of the poems; he quickly discerned they all had fourteen lines and a particular rhyming pattern. But the words themselves made little sense to him.

‘*My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun,*’ he read uncomprehendingly. He flipped through the pages again. ‘*Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments.*’ And again.

‘Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?’

‘Thou art more lovely and more temperate.

‘Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May

And summer’s lease hath all too short a date.’

That one, he decided wasn't so bad. At least it made a bit more sense. He started to wrap the book when he remembered that Hermione still wasn't talking to him. Maybe he needed to write a note or something.

He opened the front cover of the book, pulled out his quill and ink pot, and sat down to write. After fifteen minutes of doing nothing but stare at the blank cover page, he gave up trying to be eloquent and simply wrote:

Happy Birthday, Hermione. I'm sorry. Love, Ron.

He wrapped the book--badly--in plain brown paper and wrote her name on it.

Hermione wasn't at breakfast when Ron and Harry went down to the Great Hall. Ginny announced, in a rather nervous voice, that Hermione was in the library going over study schedules with Eddie Carmichael. Ron squashed another banana upon hearing this and had a powerful urge to run back to his dorm room and tear up the book he'd bought for Hermione, but instead he sat rigid as a board and forced himself to eat his eggs. Just because she's with Carmichael doesn't mean she's WITH Carmichael, he told himself over and over again.

By lunchtime the weather had turned particularly nasty. Rain pounded against the windows and thunder and lightning shook the curtains. Ron and Harry were sitting in the common room, absently doing homework, when Ginny entered, followed by Dobby the house-elf.

'Dobby!' said Harry. 'What are you doing here?'

'Dobby comes to bring Miss Hermione her cake, Harry Potter, sir!' Dobby squeaked. He was wearing about a dozen of Hermione's knit elf-hats, an ugly tie and an equally awful pair of shorts and four pairs of Hermione's elf socks. In his hands was a huge platter with a luridly decorated cake that read HAPPEE BERTHDAI HERMONNIE.

'Oh, she'll...she'll love that,' Harry said, grinning at Ron.

'Dobby has decorations, too, Harry Potter, sir!' Dobby said gleefully, dancing around. The cake wobbled dangerously.

'Maybe you should put that down first,' Harry suggested, pointing to the coffee table in front of the fire.

'Hey, Dobby,' said Ron, smiling.

'Dobby is pleased to see Mr. Wheezy,' said Dobby, bowing low so that his hats touched the floor. In the next instant Dobby was hanging up banners and passing out birthday hats and noise-makers.

‘Are you responsible for this?’ Harry asked Ginny, as Dobby sung to himself (Ron was sure it sounded like ‘Wheezy is Our King’).

‘I guess,’ Ginny said, watching Dobby with a mixture of awe and horror. ‘I mean, all I said was I needed a cake for Hermione’s birthday. He went sort of mad with all this other stuff.’

‘We’ll take it down when he leaves,’ Harry muttered, as Dobby finished hanging the last banner--it, too, was horribly misspelled--and bowing low again.

‘Uh, thanks, Dobby,’ said Harry.

‘You is welcome, Harry Potter, sir!’ Dobby squealed. ‘And Miss and Mr. Wheezies! Dobby likes to do nice things for the friends of Harry Potter and the Wheezies! But Dobby must get back to the kitchens. Please give this to Hermione for Dobby!’ He held out a pair of huge ugly, mismatched socks.

‘Sure thing,’ said Harry, grinning, and Dobby danced out of the common room, humming to himself.

‘Right, so, uh, let’s get this stuff tamed down a bit,’ Harry suggested, and the three of them quickly tore down most of Dobby’s decorations (Ron thought the ones with Harry’s image on them singing an off-key Happy Birthday were especially bad) and threw them into the fire.

Ron raced upstairs to fetch his and Harry’s presents for Hermione and were just returning downstairs when they heard someone crawling through the portrait hole. Ron put his present behind his back as Hermione came into the common room.

‘Oh!’ she said, looking surprised.

‘Happy Birthday!’ Ginny and Harry yelled. Ron meant to yell, too, but his throat seemed to have stopped working.

Hermione’s hair had curled in the humid weather, and her face was slightly flushed, her eyes bright. She looked tired, dishevelled and vulnerable, but prettier than Ron had ever remembered. He was glad her hair was curling, for some reason.

Hermione smiled weakly at all of them, but gave Ron a kind of nervous glance.

‘Thanks,’ she said uncertainly.

‘Come on,’ Ginny said, a bit too heartily. ‘Blow out your candles and eat some cake and open your presents.’

‘Right,’ she said, forcing a smile. She headed over to the coffee table where Ginny had arranged the cake--and sixteen flaming candles in it.

Hermione smiled--a real smile this time--and leaned over the cake, one hand holding

her hair back.

‘Make a wish,’ Ron blurted, not knowing how or why he said that.

She looked up at him coolly for a moment, and Ron swallowed. Then she gave a great puff of air and blew out the candles in one.

Ginny and Harry clapped. Ginny began to cut the cake and Harry handed her a neatly wrapped, rather large package. Ron felt his stomach clench. Harry’s gift, whatever it was, almost certainly was better than Ron’s. It would be nicer, newer, shinier, more expensive. Ron looked down glumly at his small package and immediately wished he wasn’t even in the room. He wasn’t sure he wanted to watch Hermione open up a glorious present from Harry.

‘Oh, Harry, thanks so much!’ Hermione said, sounding happy for the first time in days. ‘This is wonderful.’ She was holding a large, leatherbound book with gold pages. There was no title on the cover, but on the spine was the legend *THE GREAT WITCHES OF EARLY BRITANNIA*.

Hermione opened the book eagerly. ‘It starts here with Morgan Le Fey,’ she said, sounding thrilled. ‘She was the most fascinating witch in the world, I think. Well, at least the most fascinating of the early English witches, anyway. Did you know she was King Arthur’s half-sister?’

‘I’m glad you like it,’ Harry said, smiling. Ron’s stomach clenched painfully again as Hermione put the book down and leapt up from the couch to hug Harry.

‘I love it, thanks!’

She opened Ginny’s gift, which was a very simple silver bracelet with a single charm on it, an ‘H’. ‘You can add charms if you want,’ said Ginny, as Hermione hugged her in turn.

‘Ron, your turn,’ Ginny said. Ron seemed to snap out of a reverie.

‘Oh, right,’ he said, handing over his package. It was so badly wrapped that his ears went pink. ‘Uh, sorry about the wrapping.’

Hermione looked at him, uncertain, it seemed, as to whether to accept the gift or not. Considering they hadn’t said a word to one another since their last row, this was to be expected, but then Ron had a fleeting, horrible vision of her yelling at him and throwing his gift into the fire.

Instead, she took it from him, very slowly, her eyes never leaving his face. He swallowed.

‘Thanks,’ she said shortly, and tore open the brown paper.

For several moments there was silence. Hermione stared at the book--which looked pathetically tiny and feeble compared to Harry’s book on witches--and then opened

the front cover and read the brief note there.

She looked up at him with a thin film of tears in her eyes.

‘Where did you get this?’ she asked.

‘Dean,’ Ron mumbled. ‘Dean Thomas. His parents are Muggles, you know. His dad owns this book shop in London, they sell rare books and stuff--’

But Ron felt his voice stop and his throat close, for Hermione had closed the distance between them and hugged him very tightly.

‘Thank you,’ she said softly, and Ron heard her sniff.

Ron looked at Harry and Ginny, who were both smiling wryly. Bewildered, he slowly put his arms around Hermione.

‘You, uh, like it, then?’ Ron asked, trying not to look at Harry and Ginny, who were both grinning broadly.

‘I love it,’ she said, and she gave a short laugh. ‘It’s perfect.’ She pulled back from him slightly, went up on tip-toe and kissed him on the cheek. ‘Thank you,’ she said again, stepping back from him.

Ron swallowed, his mouth so dry he wasn’t sure he would ever be able to talk properly again. His stomach was flipping about madly. He began to wonder if he was developing a sensitivity to Hogwarts’ food. Except that his stomach only seemed to go wild when he touched Hermione.

‘You’re welcome,’ he croaked.

She was smiling radiantly at him, her eyes still filmed with tears, a single tear escaping down her cheek. Ron, whose face was on fire, had the overwhelming urge to brush the tear away with his hand, but he seemed frozen to the spot.

‘So, who wants cake?’ Ginny asked, a bit too loudly.

‘I do,’ Harry said, also a bit too loudly.

‘Oh, I’d love some!’ said Hermione, wiping away the tear and turning to look at her luridly decorated cake.

‘Uh, yeah,’ said Ron, shaking his head, his face still hot. ‘I’ll take some.’

Chapter Ten: The Halloween Ball

Bill and Harry scheduled the first D.A. meeting to take place on a Tuesday night, and got permission from Dumbledore to use the Great Hall. Harry had spent the rest of the weekend working up a schedule with Bill and squeezing in another Occlumency lesson.

Ron was getting more and more worried about Harry. The only time he seemed remotely himself these days was during Quidditch practices. He was quieter, more closed off than he had ever been; Ron knew that Harry's scar was hurting him worse than he was letting on. He knew that Occlumency lessons were draining him of energy and spirit. But Ron didn't have a clue how to help.

The afternoon of the D.A. meeting, their Defence Against the Dark Arts lesson was letting out. They had finished Patronuses and were working on Repelling Spells, to ward off some of the milder curses; Bill informed them that Occlumency lessons would begin after Halloween.

The class filed out, but Ron lagged behind, anxious to talk to Bill. Draco Malfoy shot him a sneering look, and as he passed he said under his breath, 'My dad's out, Weasel-king. Your Mudblood girlfriend's as good as dead. Not to mention Saint Potter.' Crabbe and Goyle were flanking Malfoy and they chuckled sycophantically.

Ron took a threatening step toward Malfoy, fully prepared to hex the hell out of him right then and there, when Bill intervened.

'Clear off, Malfoy,' he snapped. 'Unless you'd like a few detentions.'

'We were just leaving, *Professor*,' Malfoy drawled sarcastically, shooting a disgusted look at Bill.

Malfoy turned on his heel and stalked out of the classroom, followed by his cronies. They passed Hermione, who was standing in the doorway, looking at Ron anxiously, but they said nothing to her, clearly not wanting to risk it in front of Bill. Harry had already left.

'I'll catch up,' Ron called, giving her a smile. She nodded, but she took her time leaving, clearly not interested in being confronted by Malfoy and his goons on her own again. Ron and Bill waited a few seconds while Hermione made much ado about re-packing her bag, and then smiled at her as she edged her way out of the classroom.

‘What’s up?’ Bill asked, returning to his desk and stacking up several rolls of parchment.

‘I want to talk to you,’ Ron said. ‘About Harry.’

‘What about Harry?’

‘I’m worried about him,’ said Ron. ‘He’s not himself. Not at all. He’s tired all the time, he doesn’t talk to me or Hermione. He’s got this...this sort of...I dunno...this haunted look about him all the time. I think this Occlumency stuff is really starting to mess with his head.’

Bill stopped packing up his things and looked up at Ron, a sad smile on his face.

‘Learning Occlumency takes its toll for a while,’ Bill said, trying to sound reassuring. ‘But eventually he’s going to get stronger. He has to.’

‘What if he doesn’t?’ Ron retorted. ‘Last year with Snape he got worse, okay? His scar hurt him all the time. And yeah, you’re a whole lot nicer than Snape is but you’re still invading his brain or whatever it is you’re doing and he looks like hell and he’s--’

‘Not himself,’ Bill finished. ‘Look, Ron, I know this isn’t easy for you to watch. It’s not easy for me, either. It’s not fun for me to do this stuff to him. You think I leave those lessons feeling good about myself? I don’t. But it’s vital that Harry learn how to do this. It’s vital that he master it. Dumbledore wouldn’t have let me teach him if he didn’t think Harry could handle it.’

‘Yeah, but what happens along the way?’ Ron shot back. ‘Dammit, Bill, Sirius died, okay? And he still had to spend half his summer with those rotten Muggles and even if they were a bit nicer to him it’s not like he had his friends around him to help him deal with Sirius dying. How much is he supposed to take?’

Bill shook his head. ‘Ron, Harry is more important than you understand. Than even I understood. Harry is the only person who can destroy Voldemort, okay? He’s the only one.’

‘Oh, come off it,’ Ron snorted. ‘What’s that all about? Since when? I thought Dumbledore was the only one Voldemort ever feared.’

‘I can’t tell you why this falls on Harry,’ Bill said. ‘Dumbledore swore me to keep it a secret, and anyway, it’s not for me to tell you. It’s for Harry to tell. I’m sorry I can’t be more helpful.’

‘Tell me what I can do to help him, then,’ Ron said, feeling very uncomfortable talking about Harry like this.

‘Just be his friend,’ said Bill simply. ‘You and Hermione, and Ginny, and anyone else.’

What you have to understand is that Harry is only beginning to realize the burdens he's faced with. He's going to try and push you away because he thinks it'll be safer that way. Don't let him do it. He can't do this on his own.'

'But you just said he's the only one--'

'It's complicated,' Bill said patiently. 'Some day you'll understand better.'

'Oh, great,' said Ron angrily. 'That's a fine answer. I'm not a kid, you know, Bill. I can take whatever--'

'I told you, it's not my place to say,' Bill said, sitting down in his chair.

Ron gave a huge sigh, feeling defeated. He had hoped Bill might shed some light on Harry's behavior, but now Ron felt only more confused.

'I better go, I guess,' said Ron glumly. 'I'll see you at the D.A. meeting in a bit, shall I?'

Bill nodded but said nothing. Ron nodded back, picked up his bag, and dragged himself out of the classroom, feeling as bad as he had felt after his recent rows with Hermione.

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Three hours later Ron, Harry and Hermione returned to the Great Hall to find it completely cleared of tables and chairs. In their places were what had to be hundreds of cushions. Bill seemed to be arranging a pair of them and looked up.

'Hey,' he said, nodding to them. 'Well, I guess people will be coming around in a few minutes. Unless they forgot to look at the message boards. Harry, you want to assist?'

'Sure,' said Harry in a flat voice. He looked as exhausted and gloomy as ever, but he forced a smile for Bill's benefit.

Very quickly students began to file in. It was a much bigger turn-out than the original D.A. meetings, but then again, the first time through they had been a secret organization and had not broadcast their intentions to everyone.

Many familiar faces were there, however. Susan Bones, Hannah Abbott, Ernie MacMillan and Zacharias Smith of Hufflepuff trooped in together. Next came some Ravenclaws, including Luna Lovegood, Cho Chang, Michael Corner, Terry Boot, Anthony Goldstein, Padma Patil, and to Ron's extreme annoyance, Eddie Carmichael. Then several more Gryffindors, including Ginny, Neville, Seamus, Dean, Parvati, Lavender and both Creevey brothers. But when Ron saw who entered the room next he would have traded them for a whole room full of Eddie Carmichaels.

Draco Malfoy strode in, followed by Crabbe, Goyle, the Slytherin Quidditch captain Montague, Blaise Zabini, Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode.

‘What are THEY doing here?’ Ron demanded, not bothering to lower his voice.

‘Ron!’ Hermione hissed. ‘They can be here if they want.’

‘Oh, come on!’ Ron hissed back. ‘They’re only here so they can do nasty spells on people, namely us.’

‘They’re not going to do anything with Bill here,’ Hermione insisted. ‘And don’t forget all the other original D.A. members. Remember what they did to Malfoy and those two thugs on the train?’

‘Right,’ Ron said, brightening a little at the memory of the three giant slugs several D.A. members had turned Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle into at the end of last term.

‘Attention, please, everyone!’ Bill called as he stood up on a chair. ‘As most of you know this group exists for the purpose of practicing defensive spells. The group was led last year by Harry Potter, of course, but this year I’m in charge, and Harry will assist. As such, any out-of-turn hexing, jinxing or cursing will be severely punished.’ He shot an appraising glance at the Slytherins.

‘Tonight we’re going to go over everything we’ve covered so far. Reductor Curses, Disarming Spells, Impediment Jinxes, Total Body Binds, the whole lot. We’ll end with Patronuses. Pair up, please.’

Ron made a move to pair up with Harry, who looked grateful to get away from Bill for a few moments. Ron could tell Harry was not entirely comfortable with starting the D.A. up again, especially with so many Slytherins present.

Hermione started to pair with Neville when Eddie Carmichael glided over, a smarmy grin on his face.

‘Want to partner up, Hermione?’ Eddie said in that honeyed, nauseating voice.

‘Oh, lovely,’ Ron muttered under his breath.

‘All right, then,’ said Hermione, her cheeks pink. She had a radiant kind of smile on her face. Ron felt distinctly sick.

‘Just go easy on me, okay?’ Eddie said, winking at her.

‘That’s not really the point of D.A. meetings, Eddie,’ Ron said scathingly. Harry swatted him on the arm.

‘Knock it off,’ he said under his breath.

Hermione gave Ron a murderous look and Ron quickly shrugged his shoulders apologetically. Eddie, however, hadn’t noticed anything, because he was too busy leering rather obviously at Hermione, his eyes lingering on the swell of her breasts. Ron realized that he, too, was glancing surreptitiously at this particular part of Hermione’s body. His neck went hot; he really oughtn’t look at her chest like that, but,

well, it looked very nice on her, and anyway, he was a bloke and he couldn't really help noticing things like that.

Ron looked at Eddie again, who was grinning wolfishly at Hermione; the Head Boy then stole another look at Hermione's chest and licked his lips. Ron clenched his fists.

'Harry, do-a-curse-on-me-now-because-if-you-don't-I'm-going-to-pound-Carmichael's-face-in,' Ron said, very fast in one breath and in low voice so Eddie and Hermione couldn't hear. But Harry swatted him on the arm again to shut him up. Ron took a deep breath to calm himself down and settled for grinding his teeth.

'Wands out,' Bill instructed. 'When I give the word, do the Disarming Spell. Ready. GO!'

Shouts of '*Expelliarmus!*' filled the room. Ron pointed his wand at Harry but Harry was too quick for him; he shouted the incantation and Ron's wand flew out of his hand and clattered to the floor.

'Damn,' Ron muttered, picking up his wand. 'How is it you're so fast?'

'I'm smaller than you,' Harry said, and he grinned for the first time in many days. 'You've got those big meathooks for hands. And those huge feet. Makes you slow and clumsy.'

'Ha ha,' said Ron. 'Well, you know what they say about blokes with big hands and feet?'

'What do they say?' Hermione asked, handing Eddie back his wand.

'Oh, uh, I don't know, actually,' Ron lied, feeling his face get hot. Oops. He hadn't meant for anyone but Harry to hear him.

'Oh, come on, Weasley,' said Eddie, in a falsely jovial kind of voice, as though he were enjoying a lewd joke with a close mate. 'Everyone knows that old saying.'

'Yeah, well, I don't,' Ron said through clenched teeth, and it took every ounce of self control not to shove his wand up Eddie's perfect, perky little nose.

'I'm sure Hermione'd love to hear it,' Eddie went on.

Just then Bill came by. 'Boys, stop fighting over Hermione, would you? This is a meeting, not a social club or a pissing contest.'

Eddie gave a hearty laugh and Ron stared at his older brother in fury and disbelief.

Hermione gave a nervous laugh.

‘Um, shall we?’ she asked Eddie. ‘Continue, I mean?’

‘All right, then,’ Eddie said, giving her his most dazzling smile. ‘Let’s see what you’ve got.’

Ron’s temper reached the boiling point at that instant, and it was only the most fleeting desire of not wanting to make Hermione angry with him that he aimed his wand at Harry instead of Eddie.

‘*Impedimenta!*’ he shouted, and Harry went flying off his feet.

‘Ron!’ Bill snapped. ‘We’re doing Disarming Spells, not Impediment Jinxes.’

‘It’s okay,’ Harry said, sounding a bit winded as he got up. ‘I’m fine. That was a good one, Ron.’

‘Thanks,’ said Ron darkly. ‘Sorry about that.’

‘No problem,’ said Harry, smiling wryly and fixing Ron with a knowing look.

‘Keep your mind on what you’re doing, please?’ Bill said under his breath.

Ron gave his brother a hateful look as he walked away and tried to ignore the sniggering of the Slytherins and the fact that Hermione was beaming happily at Eddie.

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It was less than a week to Halloween and Ron was so caught up with his studies, Quidditch, prefect duties and the D.A. that he forgot about the Halloween ball. He was rudely reminded of it by huge signs (no doubt put up by that prat Carmichael) posted outside the common rooms.

‘You STILL don’t have a date?’ Harry asked. He was in a better mood this week, though Ron hadn’t quite figured out why.

‘No,’ Ron said sullenly. ‘I forgot about it, okay? Now help me figure out who to ask, because if I show up alone and Crabbe and Goyle get dates to this thing, I’m going to kill myself.’

‘What about Padma?’ Harry suggested. ‘She might, you know, give you another go. Maybe she heard about your huge hands and feet.’

‘Ha ha,’ said Ron, rolling his eyes. ‘Padma’s going with Anthony. Try again.’

‘How about Parvati, then?’ Harry said. ‘She’s a bit nicer than Padma, and she plays Quidditch.’

‘That’s a bit weird, though, isn’t it?’ said Ron, looking sceptical. ‘Going out with one sister and then taking out the other?’

‘Ron, you went to the Yule Ball with Padma two years ago,’ Harry said, sounding a bit exasperated. ‘I’m sure neither of them would care.’

‘Yeah, all right then,’ Ron said, resigning himself to asking Parvati. Well, Ron thought, at least she’s really good looking.

But Ron was unsuccessful with Parvati, as she had already secured a date with Terry Boot, the Ravenclaw Chaser.

‘What about Luna?’ Harry suggested, when Ron came back to him empty-handed.

‘Not on your life,’ said Ron firmly. ‘I already told you that.’

They were silent for a moment, both considering.

‘Hey,’ Ron said, brightening. ‘What about that Susan Bones?’

‘Uh, she’s going with me, actually,’ said Harry, blushing.

‘Oh,’ said Ron, deflating a bit. ‘You fancy her?’

‘I dunno,’ said Harry, staring at his shoelaces suddenly as if they were fascinating. ‘She’s nice, you know. Smart. Not bad looking, either. I mean, I don’t know her all that well, but we, uh, we’ve sort of been talking...here and there.’

‘That’s great, Harry,’ said Ron impatiently. ‘But I’m the one with no date, remember?’

‘Right,’ said Harry. ‘How about Lavender?’

‘Fine, except she’s Seamus’s girlfriend,’ said Ron, rolling his eyes.

‘Oh, right. Hannah Abbott?’

‘She’s with Ernie.’

‘Eloise Midgen?’

‘Her nose is crooked!’

‘There HAS to be a girl around for you to go with.’

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Two days before the ball Ron was still dateless, and to his horror he learned that Crabbe and Goyle had indeed somehow managed to secure dates.

He was returning from dinner to go get ready for Quidditch practice when Luna Lovegood floated dreamily toward him, her protuberant eyes managing to look both hazy and bright at the same time.

‘Oh, hello, Ronald,’ she said in that slow voice of hers.

‘Uh, hi,’ he said uncomfortably. ‘I’m just on my way...have to go to Quidditch practice, so...’ He started down the hall, but to his shock, she followed him. It was amazing how she was able to keep up with his long stride, considering she was so much shorter than he was and that her legs barely seemed to move. Maybe she’d done a Levitation Charm on herself.

‘I heard you don’t have a date for the Halloween ball,’ Luna said, smiling raptly at him.

‘Uh, no, I don’t,’ Ron said, picking up his pace and looking around desperately for someone, anyone, to get him away from her. At this point he’d take Peeves dumping stinksap on his head.

‘Well, I don’t, either,’ Luna said, but she didn’t sound too upset about it. ‘I’ve always thought it’s not very nice, these social events that pressure people to pair up. Someone always gets left out.’

‘Right,’ said Ron, at last spotting the fat lady’s portrait and now practically running.

‘But since the ball is what it is, perhaps you and I could--’

‘I really have to run, Luna,’ Ron said quickly.

‘Fainting Fancies’ he practically shouted at the fat lady. ‘See you later,’ he said to Luna, throwing himself through the portrait hole.

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‘I don’t see why you can’t go with Luna,’ said Hermione the next morning, when Ron had filled her in on his encounter with Luna in the hallway.

‘You don’t?’ Ron said, incredulous. ‘You’re the one who thinks she’s a mad bat, remember?’

‘Well, she is a little off, I’ll grant you,’ said Hermione, daintily sipping a cup of coffee, ‘but she’s nice enough. And, no offence Ron, but it’s not as if there’s much left.’

‘Who’s fault is that?’ Ron snapped angrily.

‘Don’t go there!’ Harry said quickly, glaring at him and Hermione. They both settled

for giving each other dirty looks and finishing their breakfast in silence.

By the next day Ron had resigned himself simply to not going to the ball at all. Hermione lectured him for a full fifteen minutes before he told her to put a lid on it, which succeeded only in offending her and her giving him another round of the silent treatment for the rest of the day.

The day of the ball came and Ron was still dateless. For half the day he sulked, insisting he wouldn't go, but then Harry gently reminded him that if he, Ron, didn't go, he wouldn't get to keep an eye on Eddie Carmichael and Hermione. Ron spent the rest of the day in search of a date. His only criteria were that she be at least fifteen and not Luna Lovegood.

But to his amazement, nobody was available. Every girl he approached had secured a partner for the evening's events. He couldn't understand how it had happened.

He was just working up the courage to go to Professor McGonagall's office to ask her to conjure up a girl for him to take to the ball when Luna Lovegood found him again.

'Hi, Ronald,' she said, smiling at him and twirling her dark blonde hair in her fingers.

'Oh, uh, hi,' he said. 'What...what's up?'

'Let's go to the Halloween ball together, shall we?' she asked. 'I have a really spectacular costume. And you wouldn't have to dance with me. I know you don't like to dance.'

'Don't I?' Ron said, a sense of horror and dread filling him. But something else was taking over his thoughts: a sense of guilt. Luna wasn't looking at him with her usual dreamy expression. There was something like desperation there instead. He wondered just how much she really liked him.

For a whole minute she simply looked at him expectantly, and he said nothing, his mind debating. If he agreed to take Luna, what if she took it the wrong way and thought he fancied her? But maybe if he was honest with her she'd get hysterical and curse him. She was scary enough to do that. Then there was the idea of showing up with Luna at the ball in the first place. The Slytherins would have a field day laughing at him. And he could only imagine the kind of costume Luna had come up with.

'Ronald, you haven't answered my question,' she pressed.

'Uh, okay,' he said, before he realized just what he was saying. He swallowed. 'Yeah. I'll...I'll go with you.'

'Ooh, Ronald!' she cried, and she twirled around three times before throwing her arms around him and kissing him wetly on the cheek. 'We'll have so much fun, I promise!' Even in her excitement her voice never lost its vague, dreamy quality.

'Yeah,' said Ron, trying to push her away gently. 'Look, Luna. Um, you're a nice girl, okay? But...but I really just...prefer to be friends. Okay? I mean, let's have fun at the

ball and what, but just...as friends.'

'Oh, of course, Ronald,' she said, as though she hadn't really heard him. 'I'd better get ready. See you in a little while!'

She had danced off down the hallway before Ron realized that he hadn't thought to ask her when or where to meet him.

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It was only when Ron returned to the common room that he remembered he hadn't given a thought toward assembling a costume. He raced up the spiral staircase and threw open the door to the dormitory.

'Hey,' said Harry, looking up as he put on a ripped black T-shirt that bore the legend The Sex Pistols. His black hair, always untidy, was now sticking out in very severe spikes as though it were full of glue. 'Get a date yet?'

'Yeah,' said Ron, 'Luna Lovegood. And if you laugh or say anything about it I swear I'll punch your lights out.'

'I wasn't going to, mate,' said Harry quickly.

What are you supposed to be dressed up as, anyway?'

'Sid Vicious,' said Harry.

'Who?'

'He was in this Muggle punk rock band back in the 70s,' said Harry. 'But he died of a drug overdose or something. The T-shirt's Dudley's. My hair's the wrong color and Sid Vicious didn't wear glasses, but it's the best I could come up with.'

'I need a costume,' said Ron, tearing open his trunk and pulling out clothes, throwing them haphazardly on his bed.

'Just go as a Chudley Cannon, you've got loads of their T-shirts,' Harry suggested, pulling at a tuft of his hair to make it stand up straighter.

'Good idea,' said Ron. 'That's easy enough.' He grabbed an orange Cannons t-shirt and a pair of old jeans and changed, then threw all his clothes carelessly back into his trunk. 'I could do the hat, too. What do you think?' He slapped the cap on his head. It clashed terribly with his hair.

'Uh, no,' said Harry. 'I mean, you're already really...orange.'

'Right. I can't believe I agreed to take Luna Lovegood,' he said miserably, taking off the cap and running a hand through his hair. 'Harry, I think she...fancies me.'

'I hadn't noticed,' said Harry dryly. 'Come on, Ron, it's one night. It won't kill you.'

‘Speak for yourself,’ said Ron. ‘She doesn’t fancy you. I told her I just wanted to be friends but I don’t think she really believed me. What if she tries something?’ He shuddered.

‘What, you mean like try to snog you on the dance floor or something?’ Harry said. ‘Ron, you’re twice her size. I’m sure you can handle it if she tries to attack you or something.’

‘Harry!’ Neville called breathlessly, hurtling into the dorm room. ‘Susan’s downstairs waiting for you. I let her in, I hope that’s okay.’

‘Thanks, Neville,’ he said, and he started out of the dorm room.

‘Harry, don’t leave me!’ Ron cried, running after him. Neville stared at him.

‘Ron, get a grip,’ said Harry, rolling his eyes. ‘She’s just a girl, okay?’

‘Right,’ said Ron glumly, watching Harry’s retreating back. ‘Just a girl. A complete nutter, but just a girl.’ He stumped down the stairs in time to see Harry greet Susan, whose reddish-brown hair was done up in two plaits. She was wearing some kind of tan dress made of what looked like an animal skin, and wearing lots of beads around her neck. She looked rather nice, Ron thought, though he had no clue what her costume was supposed to be, but he wish he’d thought to ask Susan before Harry had.

‘Hi, Harry,’ she said, her voice a bit breathy. ‘Wow. You look...interesting. Sid Vicious?’

‘Yeah,’ said Harry, grinning. ‘How’d you know?’

‘I’ve been taking Muggle studies,’ said Susan. ‘Thought I’d do a little extra research on the side. That’s how I came up with my costume, actually. Pocahontas.’

‘The Indian princess, right?’ said Harry. ‘Cool. Uh, you look...really good.’

‘My hair’s the wrong color and I’m way too pale but...well, anyway,’ she said shyly.

Ron watched the exchange and noticed that Harry kept clenching his fists nervously and looking at his shoes.

‘So, uh, wanna go?’ said Harry, and he offered her his arm. Ron bit his lip to keep from laughing. Harry, the Punk Rocker, holding out his arm like some Victorian gentleman or something. Susan blushed prettily and took it.

‘See you, Ron!’ Harry called, and Ron could only nod. He wondered briefly where Hermione had gone, if she was already at the ball, if Eddie Carmichael was snogging her, and he felt slightly sick.

‘Come on, Ron, or we’ll be late,’ said Neville, squeezing past him to go down the stairs.

‘Neville, did you ever get a date?’ Ron asked, following him down the stairs and out through the portrait hole.

‘Oh, uh, yes,’ said Neville. ‘I’m going with Katie.’

‘Katie?’ Ron asked, his eyes widening. ‘Katie Bell?’

‘Yes,’ said Neville blushing. ‘She’s...really nice, don’t you think? I need to run, though. I’m supposed to meet her in three minutes!’ He hurried down the corridor toward the Great Hall.

Dammit! Ron thought to himself. How could I have forgotten about Katie? He never dreamed he’d be jealous of Neville for anything.

‘Hi, Ronald.’

Ron looked up in time to see Luna gliding down the corridor toward him. He gulped. She didn’t look too bad, actually, all things considered. True, she was wearing a huge, ridiculously plumed hat and some kind of lurid, lacy, magenta, old fashioned full-length dress with a massive bustle in the back, but it could have been worse. And her hair looked almost nice, tied up in a loose bun (or at least Ron assumed that’s what it was; he couldn’t see all of it for the hat).

‘Uh, hi,’ he said uncertainly. ‘What’re you supposed to be?’

‘I’m a Gibson Girl,’ she said, but offered no further explanation.

‘That’s...nice,’ said Ron, not having a clue what a Gibson Girl was and not caring enough to ask.

‘You’re very orange,’ she noted. ‘I don’t think that color is good for you.’

‘Probably not,’ said Ron, a bit defensively.

‘I heard from Daddy that the Chudley Cannons haven’t won a championship in ages,’ Luna went on. ‘Of course, they wouldn’t have. They’ve been under an Imperius Curse by Cornelius Fudge. He got tired of assassinating goblins and decided to rig Quidditch matches.’

Holy Merlin, she is completely mad, Ron thought. But he nodded and smiled. ‘Right,’ he said.

‘It’s really incredible,’ said Luna breezily. ‘Fudge has a whole underground Quidditch gambling ring. Very sinister, and totally illegal.’

‘Uh, let’s go, okay?’ Ron said quickly, not wanting to let her go off on one of her mad tangents about Fudge or heliopaths or Crumple-Horned Snorkacks or anything else.

She beamed at him and offered her arm, and Ron took it, preparing himself for the long night ahead.

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Ron entered the Great Hall full of trepidation. The Hall itself was magnificently decorated by Flitwick and the house elves. A hundred jack-o-lanterns (provided by Hagrid) were floating above; the false sky above was full of flashing lightning, and thousands of candles glittered against the windows.

But Ron barely noticed any of it. He was sure that at any moment the Slytherins would, as one, laugh at him for showing up with Loony Lovegood.

They didn’t, and Ron saw why. Bill was patrolling the room, and Fleur was with him.

Ron swallowed. Fleur was beautiful as ever, wearing robes of midnight blue satin that set off her very blue eyes. They were dancing very close together to a slow ballad of

some sort (Lee Jordan was providing the music--he waved to Ron and immediately went back to what he was doing) and Fleur had a radiant smile on her face. Her teeth were so white they practically sparkled. The Slytherin boys were all too busy gawking at her to even notice Ron and Luna. With no small amount of satisfaction Ron saw Malfoy staring dumbly at Fleur as Pansy Parkinson--wearing the get-up of a 17th century barmaid and looking very tawdry--made repeated efforts to get Malfoy to pay attention to her instead.

Ron watched Fleur for a few moments, unable to keep from looking at her.

‘She’s very beautiful, yes,’ said Luna in a serene voice. ‘She looks very happy with your brother.’

‘What?’ said Ron, as if being awoken from a reverie. ‘Right, yeah. She and Bill are pretty serious, I think.’

Ron looked around the room and saw that the boys weren’t the only ones looking at Fleur. Dozens of girls were staring daggers at her, clearly furious that their favourite teacher, Professor Weasley, had brought his girlfriend to the ball.

Ron saw Harry and Susan dancing nearby; Harry was allowing Susan to lead him. They were both smiling and looked like they were having fun, and Ron quickly shifted his attention to finding Hermione.

He spotted her across the room and felt his stomach lurch. He had no idea what she was supposed to be dressed up as, but she looked very pretty. She was wearing a long gown made of several layers of floaty, translucent material, in a shade of pale blue. She wore no robes, and her hair was done up in an intricate plait that she wore over one shoulder. It had begun to curl again and soft tendrils escaped the plait to frame her face. Entwined in the plait were silver ribbons and tiny pearls. She had a small diadem of pearls on her head. She was dancing with Eddie Carmichael, who was leering down at her and probably saying something thoroughly smarmy. When she turned, Ron saw that her dress was cut low in the back, revealing the remnants of her summer tan. Eddie’s hand travelled lazily across her bare back, which made Ron want to break all the Head Boy’s fingers.

‘Wanna dance?’ he said to Luna, in a falsely cheerful voice. Before she could answer he gripped her hand hard and yanked her out onto the dance floor.

‘I’m not a very good dancer,’ Luna said as Ron steered her around the floor.

‘Me, neither,’ said Ron. ‘It’s okay.’

Luna smiled at him, and Ron gave her a brief grin but immediately turned his eyes back to Hermione and Eddie, who were dancing closer together now. Ron was sure Eddie was trying to rub up against Hermione in a lewd and disgusting fashion.

Luna and Ron danced for another 20 minutes; Ron noticed that Luna did not change her dancing style even when the musical numbers became very fast and upbeat. She

just sort of twirled around. It wasn't too bad, he decided. She seemed to be enjoying herself and thus far nobody had given him any grief about being her date.

Another 10 minutes passed and Ron started to get tired. He noticed Eddie and Hermione return to the dance floor and begin to dance. Eddie was a very good dancer; he moved effortlessly across the floor and guided Hermione gracefully in and out of his arms. Ron felt like punching him.

'You know,' Luna said, 'if you'd rather dance with Hermione, I'd understand.'

'What?' said Ron, blinking and looking down at Luna, who, even with her huge hat and absurdly pouffy dress on, seemed very small to him just then.

'I know you're in love with Hermione, Ronald,' said Luna, and a sad kind of look crossed her large eyes. 'It's all right. I never thought I'd have a chance with you. Not really.'

Ron stared at her.

'Look, Luna,' he said, trying to keep his voice even. 'I don't fancy Hermione.'

'Of course you do,' she said, smiling at him. 'You look at her the same way I look at you, you see.'

'I really don't know what you're on about, Luna, but--'

'It's all right,' she said again. 'I'm not that hurt by it, you know. I know people think I'm odd. You think I'm odd, too. It's okay. I'm very resilient. But I think you really ought to tell her, you know. Before Eddie takes her away from you. It's not good to hide your feelings, you know.'

Ron could think of nothing to say. He was flabbergasted that she, too, would suggest that he fancied Hermione. Was there some sort of conspiracy going on, were people ganging up on him and trying to convince of something that just wasn't true? Harry, Bill, Luna, even Malfoy had accused him, in one way or another of fancying Hermione, or suggesting that she was his, Ron's, girl. It was ludicrous. Ron had never once asked Hermione out. Of course he didn't fancy her!

'Ronald,' said Luna, looking up at him. He was suddenly aware that they had stopped dancing, and she was standing in front of him with her hands at her sides. 'Thank you for escorting me to the ball. I think I'll look around and mingle a bit now. Have a lovely evening.'

Ron blinked and looked at her, and a horrible feeling of guilt took over him. He had hurt her feelings somehow, by not returning her affection. The least he could do was be a decent date for her.

'Luna, come on, let's keep dancing,' Ron said, taking her hand. 'We're friends, right? You look really nice. Let's just...have fun, okay?'

‘Thanks, but I think I’ll go,’ said Luna, and she smiled at him. ‘I like you Ronald, but not enough to be your leftovers.’ She reached up and patted him lightly on the cheek, then glided away from him, walking over to talk to Ginny, who was dressed as one of the Weird Sisters and chatting animatedly with Dean.

Ron watched Luna go, feeling wretched. He hadn’t meant to hurt her feelings. She wasn’t so bad, really. Just a little odd. He vowed to himself never to call her Loony behind her back again, or to be unkind to her.

‘Hi, Ron!’

Ron turned. It was Hermione. She was pink-cheeked and looked so pretty Ron immediately forgot all about Luna.

‘Hi,’ he said, feeling his throat constrict. ‘You look...who are you supposed to be?’

‘Titania,’ she said. ‘Queen of the Fairies. From *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. It’s a Shakespeare play.’

‘Of course,’ he said, smiling. ‘You look...really pretty.’

‘Thanks,’ she said, and she blushed. ‘So, do you want to dance with me?’

‘What about Eddie?’ Ron asked, looking around the room.

‘Oh, he’s talking with Bill,’ Hermione said, and she looked slightly annoyed about something.

Ron scanned the room and found that Eddie was indeed engaging Bill in conversation. Or at least Eddie was trying to talk; more often than not he was gawking at Fleur. Ron suddenly felt the powerful urge to smile, but he fought it.

‘Come on,’ said Hermione, grabbing Ron’s hand and tugging him toward her.

Ron swallowed, and his insides seemed to freeze. He allowed Hermione to take the lead, and she took his left arm and wrapped it around her waist, and positioned his right hand to hold her left.

‘You do know how to dance, don’t you?’ she asked, looking up at him.

‘Not really,’ said Ron, swallowing very hard. His hand was touching the bare skin of her back. It was soft. Very soft. He wished she had worn robes. Every time he touched her, it caused problems. He wasn’t sure he liked what touching her back was doing to his stomach, which was flopping around like a half-dead fish again.

Another ballad came on and Hermione pulled Ron around in a kind of careless circle. He moved stiffly, afraid of trodding on her feet or tripping over his own.

‘Are you okay, Ron?’ she asked. ‘You seem really tense.’

'I'm fine,' he said, in an unnaturally high voice. He coughed. 'I'm fine,' he said again, his voice deeper.

She led him around the room and Ron began to lose track of things. Like the music, or the chatter of all the people in the room, or anything else except Hermione. His stomach had stopped flopping and instead he felt a kind of pleasant warmth inside his chest. This wasn't so bad, he thought. It was nice, actually. He looked down into her eyes, which were glittering from the candles, and then her lips, which looked wet and shiny. His hand moved up her back, his fingers pressing her skin, and drew her a little closer. She smelled of lilacs, and there was the faint hint of chocolate on her breath. She was looking up at him and smiling, but it was a different kind of smile, somehow. Shy, perhaps. She wrapped her left arm around his neck more tightly, tilted her head up and leaned in closer and he felt his own head drop forward, so that his cheek rested against hers. He could feel her breath on his face. He felt his hand press into her back just a bit, and she moved closer still, until something very soft was pressing up against his lower chest. He opened his eyes and saw what the soft thing was, and felt electricity race up his spine, and felt the heat in his chest begin to burn and spread. He'd never had *those* pressed up against him before. He was torn between wanting to push her away and wanting to pull her closer.

Then she pulled back slightly, and he decided he did want her pressed up close like that, that he was quite enjoying her softness. He was about to pull her back when her lips seemed to drag, light as a feather, against his cheek. She looked up at him again, and she was so close her features were blurred. It was only then that Ron noticed they had stopped dancing, and that his heart was racing. Her lips were right there. They looked very soft...

'May I cut in?'

Ron felt as though he had been jerked out of a deep sleep. He blinked and backed away from Hermione quickly, looking up to see the smiling face of Eddie Carmichael.

'Oh!' said Hermione, sounding startled. She was blushing. 'Uh, hi, Eddie. Ron and I were just having a dance. You know.'

'Looked a little cozy to me,' Eddie said, smiling sleekly at her and then at Ron. Ron caught a flash of something behind Eddie's eyes. Eddie swung an arm around Hermione's shoulder and pulled her close to him. 'But that's okay,' he went on easily. 'I can understand it, Weasley, you wanting to get up close and personal with Hermione. She's quite the special girl, isn't she?' Eddie's eyes were glittering with something like a challenge.

'Yeah, she is,' said Ron, meeting Eddie's glance but not smiling.

'Ron...' Hermione began, sounding nervous.

'I'm going,' Ron announced, his eyes fixed on Eddie. 'Have a good time, Hermione.'

I'll see you later.' He turned on his heel and left the Great Hall, ignoring Hermione and Harry both calling out to him.

All the way back to the common room, however, his mind was racing. He wasn't sure what was worse: Carmichael's possessiveness over Hermione just now, or the fact that everything Harry, Bill, Luna and even Malfoy had been saying about Ron's feelings for Hermione was completely true.

Chapter Eleven: Brotherly Advice

For the next several days Ron spoke very little to Hermione. He was so thoroughly thrown off balance by the realization of his feelings for her and the fact that she liked Eddie instead of him that he barely had the wherewithal to even look at her, let alone talk to her. The only thing he was sure about was that the Halloween ball had been the worst night of his life. In one night he had managed to hurt the feelings of a perfectly nice-- if rather strange--girl and lose the girl he fancied to a slimy, handsome, smooth-talking git.

He found that the only way he could stop thinking about Hermione was to throw himself into his schoolwork and Quidditch practices even more than he already was doing. He found every excuse he could to avoid Hermione; if she was studying in the common room, he fled to the library; if she was in the library he made for the common room.

Harry tried to get Ron to talk about what had happened at the Halloween ball but Ron was too hurt and ashamed to admit it. He kept thinking about what Luna had said, that Ron should tell Hermione how he felt before Eddie Carmichael took her away. It was a little late for that now, Ron thought bitterly.

Perhaps the worst thing about it was that Ron had come to realize he'd cared for Hermione all along, but he'd been too afraid, or just too dumb, to realize it.

It was very late in the evening on a Thursday and Ron was, to his relief, alone in the common room, trying to finish his Care of Magical Creatures assignment. Hagrid had them working with kneazles, small wild cats that had the ability to literally sniff out untrustworthy Animagi--wizards and witches who could transform themselves into animals--and reveal their true human selves. At that moment Crookshanks leapt up onto the sofa and curled up against a fat cushion, purring loudly. Ron glared at him, not wanting to look at anything that reminded him of Hermione.

He turned his attention back to his homework when he heard the familiar creak of the portrait hole opening. He leapt up, not wanting to be caught alone in the common room by Hermione, but sat back down when he saw that it was Ginny.

'What are you doing here?' he demanded. 'Where have you been? It's really late.'

'Are you going to give me detention?' Ginny shot back. 'I was just in the library,

Okay? Studying with Dean. If you don't believe me you can ask Madam Pince tomorrow.'

'Right,' said Ron, sitting back in his chair and letting out a defeated sigh.

'What's wrong with you?' Ginny asked, sitting on the sofa next to the purring Crookshanks.

'Nothing,' Ron said shortly, looking back at his parchment and picking up his quill.

'Don't give me that,' Ginny said, absently scratching Crookshanks behind the ears. 'You've been miserable for days. This is about Hermione, isn't it?'

'No,' Ron said quickly. 'Why does everyone always assume that if I'm upset about something it's about Hermione?'

'So you are upset, then?' said Ginny perceptively.

'Yeh--no!' snapped Ron. She gave him a very knowing look.

'All right,' he said. 'Fine. Yes. I'm upset about Hermione.'

'You really fancy her, don't you?' said Ginny, smiling sympathetically. 'I've always suspected you did, you know.'

'Oh, well that's lovely!' said Ron angrily. 'I'm really glad to know everyone else could see the obvious when I couldn't!'

There was a silence, and then Ron gave a disgruntled snort. 'It doesn't matter, anyway. She's with Carmichael.'

'The Head Boy?' Ginny asked. 'Oh, come on, Ron you really think someone like Hermione likes that empty-headed bloke? You really are thick.'

'Thanks,' said Ron darkly. 'Any other thoughtful and supportive things you want to say to me, Ginny? Because I'm feeling really great about myself, you know. I could use a little pep talk.'

'Sorry,' said Ginny. 'But, Ron, have you ever thought that maybe Hermione fancies you, too, but she's just too afraid to tell you?'

'Get off it,' Ron said, waving his hand dismissively. 'If she fancies me why is she going out with Carmichael?'

'She's not going out with Carmichael, she just went with him to the ball,' Ginny said, rolling her eyes. 'And maybe she went with him to make you jealous, have you thought of that?'

'Yeah, well, it worked!' Ron said, his anger rising along with his voice. 'You know, what is it with girls, anyway? This is the same kind of rubbish Cho pulled on Harry

last year. Talking about other blokes to make him jealous. If Hermione fancies me why doesn't she bloody well say so? Why do I have to be the one who makes an arse of myself, anyway?'

'Ron,' said Ginny, in an infuriating, patient voice, 'Hermione may be smart and clever and tough and all that, but when it comes to romance she's no different than most girls. We like boys to make the first move. You know, sweep us off our feet a bit. That sort of thing. It's romantic.'

'It's stupid,' said Ron bitterly. 'What does she think, I'm going to fall on my knees and start reciting Shakespear to her or something? Because that's just not me, okay? I don't do that crap. I can't change who I am, Gin. I can't turn into some smooth-talking creep like Carmichael.'

'It's not about you being somebody you're not!' Ginny protested. 'It's just about you being a bit bold and doing something a bit surprising.'

'Like what?'

'Like maybe you should walk up to her in the corridor sometime and just kiss her,' Ginny suggested in a firm voice.

'I'd get a detention,' Ron said, in a rather childish sort of voice.

'Fine,' said Ginny. 'Look, Ron, I think Hermione fancies you. You fancy her. And here you are sitting around pouting about it instead of doing something about it.'

'Ginny,' Ron said in a pleading voice, and he felt his face go red. 'You don't get it. I'm...I'm pathetic when it comes to girls. I dunno the first thing about romance stuff. I've...I've never even really kissed a girl, okay? I mean, how can I sweep Hermione off her feet when I'm always tripping over my own? Answer me that.'

Ginny gave Ron a sympathetic look. 'Maybe you need to talk to one of our brothers about this,' she suggested. 'I mean, I can only tell you stuff from a girl's perspective.'

'Who can I talk to about this, Fred and George?' Ron asked sarcastically. 'They already take the mickey out of me for never having done...Number Four...let alone never snogging a girl.'

Ginny gave a derisive snort. 'As if Fred and George have ever done number four,' she said. 'Those two are full of it.'

'How do you know they haven't?' Ron asked, shocked.

'Because I just know, okay?' Ginny said. 'The same way I know Bill and Charlie and even Percy HAVE done. Blokes who've done it don't need to brag about it.'

'You...you haven't...I mean...' Ron stammered, a very horrifying thought suddenly occurring to him.

‘No!’ Ginny cried, looking affronted. ‘Honestly, Ron! I’m only fifteen. I’m not ready for sex.’

Ron winced. ‘Oi, Ginny do you have to say--’

‘What, sex?’ said Ginny, rolling her eyes. ‘Obviously YOU aren’t ready to do it if you can’t even say the word.’

‘Bloody hell,’ said Ron. ‘Sex. There I said it. Now can you please move along to something a little less disturbing?’

‘You brought it up,’ said Ginny airily.

Ron groaned and sat back in his chair.

‘And anyway, I wouldn’t tell you if I had,’ said Ginny smugly. ‘It’s none of your business.’

‘I’m your big brother, of course it’s my business!’ Ron protested.

‘Oh, get a grip, I’m not DOING anything like that, okay?’ Ginny snapped. ‘And we’re not talking about me, are we? We’re talking about you and Hermione. I think you should just talk to Bill about this stuff--he has loads of experience and he wouldn’t make fun of you about it.’

‘I guess,’ Ron conceded. He stared into the fire, still feeling uncertain and miserable.

‘I’m turning in,’ Ginny announced, standing up and stretching. ‘You should try and get some sleep. I hear Bill’s going to be starting the sixth years on Occlumency next week.’ She started up the girls’ staircase.

‘Right,’ said Ron dully, watching her go, thinking that with the way his mind was jumbled, there was no way he’d last a single lesson of Occlumency. ‘G’night.’

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‘Occlumency is the practice of clearing the mind so as to avoid revealing secrets to others,’ Bill was saying in a clear voice. ‘It’s a very useful and important defensive skill, at least as important as any of the physical defences we’ve worked on so far.’

‘Becoming skilled at Occlumency requires tremendous mental and emotional discipline,’ Bill went on. ‘I’ll warn you right now: you will not like this part of your

defensive magical training. Everyone here has secret thoughts they don't want to share with anyone, especially their teacher. My job in teaching you how to protect those thoughts is to pry into your mind and intrude on those secrets in the hopes of learning about you. Your job is to block my efforts, and you can only do that by clearing your mind of all thought.'

'Excuse me,' a snide voice drawled from the back of the room. It was Malfoy. 'Just *what* gives you the right to get inside our heads, may I ask? And what use is this stuff if we're supposed to be fighting dark wizards?'

'As if you'd fight dark wizards instead of joining them,' Harry muttered under his breath, and Ron sniggered.

Bill shot Ron a warning look, then turned to Malfoy. 'Dumbledore has given me authority, and therefore the right, to get inside your heads. As for what purpose this serves, if any of you were ever taken captive by a Death Eater, you'd want a way to avoid revealing any information in an interrogation. Unless, of course, you have no desire to protect that information.' Bill gave Malfoy a penetrating glare, and Malfoy looked away, his lips thin and angry.

'Before we start practicing on the class, I'm going to demonstrate how Legilimency-- the practice of reading another person's memories and thoughts-- and Occlumency work. Harry Potter, come up to the front of the class, please.'

Harry and Ron exchanged looks. Ron, having been so caught up in his own misery, was only now noticing that Harry didn't look as tired as he had a few weeks earlier. He seemed to be standing up straighter and had a determined look in his eye. Harry stood and strode to the front of the class, pausing just long enough to smile at Susan Bones, who smiled back.

Harry took his place across from Bill.

'Wand out,' Bill instructed, pulling out his own wand. He gave Harry a searching look, but Harry only stared back. Ron stared at them, scared and awestruck.

'Are you ready?' Bill asked.

'Yeah,' said Harry, his gaze never wavering from Bill's face.

Bill raised his wand. '*Legilimens!*' he shouted. A thin silver beam shot from Bill's wand and struck Harry in the face. Harry jerked but didn't fall. He and Bill stared at each other in silence, both their faces tense and taut with the strain of the spell. In the next instant, Harry raised his wand, waved it at Bill and shouted, '*Protego!*'

Bill jerked backward but didn't fall, and the spell was broken. He turned to the class. All of them were staring at him and Harry in shocked silence, as though they were unsure of whether to be scared or pleased by the demonstration.

'As you can see, Mr. Potter blocked my spell by using a Protection Charm,' said Bill. 'But in most cases if you're being interrogated, you wouldn't have a wand. And the

Legilimens would not give you a warning that he or she was about to use the spell. Ultimately you have to be able to use Occlumency without the benefit of a wand.' There was a pause as Bill let this sink in. Then he whirled around toward Harry, pointed his wand at him and shouted '*Accio* wand!' Harry's wand flew out of his hand and landed neatly in Bill's. In the next second, Bill shouted '*Legilimens!*' and another thin silver beam shot out, hitting Harry in the face again.

For what seemed like ages Bill and Harry stood there, staring into one another's eyes. Ron couldn't tell what was happening, except that he saw Bill's wand hand was shaking and both of them were sweating with the effort of the spell.

Bill broke the spell with a wave of his wand, and turned to the class again. He was breathing hard; Harry was panting. Bill handed Harry back his wand.

'Thanks, Harry,' he said, trying to control his own breathing. 'Good show. You can sit down.'

Harry strode back to his seat, looking pale and sweaty, but his steps were steady.

'Mr. Potter successfully blocked my attempt to break into his thoughts,' Bill explained. 'He was not prepared for my second attack, but he's been able to discipline his mind to the point that he can empty it of thoughts in a split-second, and ward me off without the aid of a wand. That kind of skill is rare even in fully qualified wizards, I have to tell you. But it's something every one of you should be striving for in your practice. I'm not going to do anything that advanced today, though. Today we're going to focus simply on clearing our minds first. Wands away, please.'

The rest of the lesson consisted of several strange meditation lessons to clear their minds. Bill produced a list on the blackboard of various methods to clear the mind, including the Serenity Charm, but warned them not to become dependent on spells, as they required the use of a wand. He gave them no homework except to practice what they'd learned.

The class ended and Ron and Harry stood and packed up their things. Susan approached Harry and they shared a few quiet words, which Ron didn't listen to, as he was too busy surreptitiously gazing at Hermione. She looked so pretty today, it almost hurt him to look at her, but he couldn't stop. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail and little wisps and curls had escaped the band to frame her face.

Hermione brushed past them, giving Ron a shy, pained sort of smile, and Ron smiled back, but his chest seemed to constrict.

'What's up with you two, anyway?' Harry whispered as they watched her go.

'Nothing,' said Ron glumly. 'I'll...I'll tell you later. I...just need to ask Bill something, all right?'

'Okay,' said Harry, giving Ron a searching look, but not pressing the issue. 'See you

at Quidditch practice, then?’

‘Right,’ said Ron, already heading toward Bill’s desk. He didn’t notice Harry leave the room.

‘What’s up, Ron?’ Bill said, putting his quill and scrolls into his bag.

‘D’you have a minute?’

‘Sure,’ said Bill. ‘You want to go to my office?’

‘Yeah.’

They left the classroom and Ron followed Bill down the corridor and into Bill’s office, closing the door behind him.

‘What’s on your mind, little brother?’ Bill said, tossing his bag carelessly onto his desk and flopping into his chair. ‘Is this about class?’

‘Uh, no,’ said Ron, feeling the heat creep up his neck. ‘It’s about...well...it’s about...uh...’

‘Girls,’ Bill said. ‘Or more specifically, a girl.’

‘Yeah,’ Ron mumbled, looking down at his feet, wishing his stupid ears didn’t get red when he got embarrassed.

‘Sit down,’ said Bill, indicating the chair across from his desk. ‘I was wondering when you’d get around to talking to me about Hermione.’

‘Who says it’s about Hermione?’ Ron said quickly, sitting down rather harder than he meant to in the chair and feeling a sharp pain in his tailbone.

Bill smiled and gave Ron a knowing look.

‘All right,’ Ron admitted. ‘Yeah, it’s about Hermione. I guess...I mean...I really think I...fancy her. You know, a bit.’

‘Just a bit?’ Bill said, his eyebrows raised.

‘Okay, a lot!’ Ron admitted, his ears nearly on fire.

Bill chuckled. ‘Nothing to be embarrassed about, Ron,’ he said. ‘But I take it you haven’t gotten around to telling her yet.’

‘No,’ said Ron, ‘and I’m not sure I want to. I mean, she’s got that stupid prat Carmichael after her, you know. He’s rich and handsome and he can dance really well and talk really well. You know, everything I’m not. If I told her, she might laugh at

me or slap me or something.'

'What makes you think Hermione likes boys like Carmichael?' said Bill. 'Smart girls like Hermione don't lose it over some pretty boy who flatters them.'

'Oh come off it,' said Ron. 'Look at you. Girls go mad over you. Half the girls in the school worship you and I don't think it's because you're a good teacher.'

'Are you saying I'm a pretty boy?' Bill asked dryly.

'You know what I mean!' Ron snapped, but then he sank back into his chair, feeling miserable. 'I'm hopeless with girls, okay? I haven't even kissed a girl. I mean, really kissed a girl. And...and Hermione's my best friend. We're mates. How can I fancy my best mate? If I tell her and she rejects me, there goes our friendship, right? But if I don't tell her our friendship is still messed up because I'm miserable all the time and I won't want to be around her.'

'Are you so sure Hermione doesn't fancy you?' Bill asked.

'No,' said Ron. 'I mean, Ginny swears she does and that she only went with Carmichael to the ball to make me jealous, but if Hermione fancies me why doesn't she tell me? Why do girls have to play these stupid games, anyway? Drives me mental.'

Bill chuckled. 'If I knew how to decipher a girl's brain, I'd tell you. All I can say is that most girls like the man to make the first move.'

'Yeah, but...but that's not fair!' Ron said desperately. 'What if she rejects me, huh? And...and this isn't the Middle Ages or anything! I thought girls were supposed to be, you know, more independent or liberated or something.'

'When it comes to this stuff girls tend to be surprisingly old fashioned,' Bill said, smiling.

'That's what Ginny said,' said Ron.

'Ginny would know,' said Bill.

'You REALLY think Hermione likes me?' Ron asked, narrowing his eyes.

'Hermione hasn't mentioned it to me personally,' Bill said, 'but yeah, I think she does. And I think she's scared of telling you for the same reason you're scared of telling her. Because it'll change your relationship and you might not know how to be or act around one another for a while.'

'This stinks,' said Ron. 'I don't know how to...how to do that romantic stuff! I can't write poetry or...or sing love songs or anything! Hermione's brilliant and she's read everything and I'm just this clumsy git. What am I supposed to say to her if I tell her?'

‘You could, I dunno, try telling her how you feel about her,’ Bill suggested.

‘Oh, that’s rich,’ said Ron acidly. “‘Hi, Hermione. I know we’ve been friends for ages but I really fancy you and I want you to go out with me.” Is that what I’m supposed to do?’

Bill laughed and shook his head. ‘You’re making this a lot more difficult than it has to be, you know. Just think about how she makes you feel, Ron. Like when you were dancing the other night. Or how you feel when she walks in the room, or when you smell her perfume or she’s close to you. Stuff like that.’

‘I’m supposed to tell her she makes me feel dizzy and weird and makes my stomach go all funny?’

‘Well, maybe not in those words,’ said Bill.

‘Then WHAT words?!’ Ron shouted.

Bill shook his head, smiling. ‘You know, I was exactly the same way when I was your age,’ he said. ‘A complete idiot around girls. My tongue got all tied in knots whenever I tried to talk to a girl I fancied. It was pathetic, really.’

‘Get off it,’ Ron snapped.

‘I’m serious,’ Bill said. ‘You think blokes are born with the ability to charm the socks off women? A few might be but most of us aren’t. We have to learn the hard way how to be around them and more often than not we make complete fools of ourselves. But in the end, they’re just people, Ron. Different, yeah, and who the hell knows how their brains work sometimes, but they’re still people. And Hermione’s your best mate. You’ve already got something really strong there. That part doesn’t have to change just because you’ve fallen for her. She’s still the same girl you became friends with, underneath it all.’

‘I guess,’ said Ron. ‘I mean, she’s still always nagging me and Harry about homework. That hasn’t changed. She’s way better at the prefect stuff, too. She actually takes it seriously. Well, I mean, I take it somewhat seriously, but not like she does. And, can you believe it, she’s still knitting those bloody hats for the house elves and talking about *spew* and...she’s changed her hair a bit, I guess. I liked it better when it was all frizzy and mad, to be honest. She used to do this thing--she doesn’t do it now, now her hair’s all flat--where she’d tuck her hair behind her ears, but it didn’t really work because her hair was just too wild...’

Bill chuckled.

‘What?’ said Ron.

‘You’ve really got it bad,’ said Bill, smiling.

‘I do?’ said Ron.

‘You were rambling just now,’ said Bill. ‘Rambling is one of the signs.’

‘Oh,’ said Ron, feeling stupid. What other dumb things was he going to be doing now that he had gone and fallen for Hermione?

‘Bill,’ he said slowly, ‘why do I feel like...I don’t deserve her?’

‘ALL blokes who fall for a girl feel that way,’ said Bill. ‘I still don’t think I deserve Fleur half the time. I mean, how could a girl that amazing be interested in stupid, worthless me, right? But I got over that. And you have to get over that, because if you go around thinking you don’t deserve Hermione, then you won’t. Hermione likes you for you. Do you understand what I’m saying?’

‘Yeah, I think so,’ Ron said, although in truth he didn’t understand completely. ‘So, uh, you think I should talk to her about this.’

‘You can’t get the girl of your dreams without taking a few risks, Ron,’ said Bill.

‘But what about Carmichael?’ said Ron feebly.

‘Forget about that idiot,’ Bill said firmly. ‘You’re a Gryffindor, remember? Start acting like one.’

## *Chapter Twelve: Attack in Hogsmeade*

For the next two weeks Ron would start off every day determined to tell Hermione his feelings for her, only to freeze up at the last moment. It was as though someone had placed a Silencing Charm on him every time he attempted to broach the subject of how he felt about her.

Hermione, for her part, was still spending some of her free time with Eddie, but she was vague as to just what was going on between them, and in any case, Ron didn't want to know. Hermione seemed to sense this and said as little as possible.

Meanwhile, the weather got colder and the first snow of the year fell. Their classes became more difficult and the homework load heavier. This, coupled with Quidditch practice, gave Ron a convenient excuse to abort his plan of telling Hermione anything, but Harry and Ginny pestered him daily.

'Just tell her, Ron!' Harry said one Saturday morning at breakfast, after Hermione had left to take a walk. 'If you don't she's going to wind up that prat's girlfriend and I'm going to go mad listening to you moan and mope about it.'

'I'll tell her!' Ron snapped. 'When I'm ready, okay?'

'By the time you're ready we'll all be thirty and Hermione will have married Eddie and had ten kids with him or something,' Ginny said dryly.

'That's not funny,' Ron growled. 'Look, drop it, all right? It's not like I haven't tried. But things are so busy now and...and anyway, I need to work out in my head what I'm going to say.'

Ginny and Harry looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

'Hi, Harry,' said a female voice. Ron looked up as Harry turned around. It was Susan Bones.

'Hi, Susan,' said Harry, and Ron suppressed a smile when he saw Harry go red in the face.

'People are building snowmen outside,' Susan said, looking rather shy and awkward. 'I thought I'd join them. Want to come?'

'Yeah,' said Harry quickly. 'Lemme just...get my winter stuff on.'

Harry, who had always had a healthy appetite in the mornings, left the table with his breakfast nearly uneaten.

'Young love,' Ginny said, looking bemused. 'If only my brother were half as brave as his best mate Harry--'

'Shut it, Ginny.'

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The following evening Ron and Hermione were sitting in the common room, quietly attending to their Transfiguration essays. Ron knew he ought to tell Hermione now, while they were alone, but he couldn't. He found the companionable silence they shared comforting, and he didn't relish the idea of disturbing it by saying something stupid to her.

They looked up when Harry clambered through the portrait hole.

'Hey,' he said.

'Where've you been?' Ron asked absently, scratching out a line on his parchment.

'Oh, uh, studying,' he said. 'With Susan. You know.'

Ron looked up at him and smirked. Harry's face was flushed as his lips looked a bit red, and his normally untidy hair was rather more untidy than usual. He did not have the look of someone who'd been engaging in studying.

'Are you two dating?' Hermione asked briskly. Harry blushed and Ron rolled his eyes.

'Honestly, Hermione, you're so nosy,' he said.

'I was only asking,' she said defensively. 'So, Harry?'

'Well, uh, we're going to Hogsmeade together next weekend,' said Harry. 'But, you know, nothing serious or anything.'

'But you like her,' Hermione pressed.

'Hermione!'

'Yeah, I like her,' said Harry, smiling. 'What are you two doing?' he added, throwing Ron a smug look. Ron glared at him.

'Transfiguration homework,' said Hermione, looking down at her parchment again and adding a few words. 'Have you finished yours?'

'No, I was working on Charms and Potions,' said Harry. 'Good lord, Hermione. Is that your second foot of parchment?'

'Yes,' she said. 'So?'

Harry smiled and shook his head. 'Never mind. You like to cover all the bases. Look, I'm beat. I'm turning in, see you two tomorrow then.'

'Right,' said Ron, waving a hand at him but not looking up from his homework as he

crossed out yet another line on his parchment, which was nearly full.

Harry was halfway up the spiral staircase when he gave a shout of pain and stumbled.

‘Harry!’ Hermione leapt up from the couch, followed immediately by Ron. Ron reached the stairs first, owing to his long strides, and caught Harry before he fell.

‘What's wrong, mate?’ Ron asked.

‘My scar,’ Harry said, pressing his hand against it. ‘Dammit.’

‘Ron, bring him down here,’ Hermione said, beckoning to the sofa. Ron gripped Harry around the shoulder and helped him back down the stairs, where he sank gratefully onto the sofa, still clutching at his scar.

‘It's Voldemort again,’ he said darkly. ‘Something happened.’

‘Is he...is he happy again?’ Ron asked, shuddering.

‘Not happy,’ said Harry. ‘More like...anxious. I saw something, too. A corridor. It was all silver and had these weird metal doors.’

‘That sounds like the Department of Mysteries,’ said Hermione.

‘No, it wasn't,’ said Harry. ‘It was different, the place looked brand new. And there were all these red markings on the doors. And the doors, they had glass windows, and it was really brightly lit. And there were people in it, wearing these long white coats.’

‘Long white coats?’ Hermione repeated. ‘That...that sounds like a laboratory. Do you remember anything else?’

‘No,’ said Harry, breathing heavily as the pain in his scar subsided.

Ron and Hermione looked at each other, then at Harry, and realized they would again be waiting on tenterhooks until the next morning, when the next issue of *The Daily Prophet* arrived.

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Next morning they hurried into breakfast. Ron had completely forgotten about his plan to tell Hermione the truth that day; he was too worked up over Harry's latest vision and even though Hermione looked particularly pretty he couldn't quite bring himself to think of romantic things. They sat down to eat and glanced repeatedly up toward the front of the Great Hall, where Professor Sinistra and Professor Snape were sitting.

Finally, it happened. A screech and the flutter of wings indicated the morning post. A barn owl dropped Hermione's latest copy of *The Daily Prophet* neatly on the table next to her cereal bowl and flew off after she had put a Knut in its leg sack. She yanked open the paper, nearly tearing it, and looked at it wildly, then gasped.

‘Listen to this, listen to this,’ she said, her voice lowered to an excited whisper as she read the passage in an article on page three. ‘Three separate break-ins at hospital research laboratories in Europe in the past two days. One in Edinburgh, one in London and one in Paris. Muggle authorities and security workers at each lab insist nothing was taken but that the perpetrators were not apprehended. The Acting Minister of Magic, Amelia Bones, told Daily Prophet reporters that the Ministry does not believe the burglary attempts are related but that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement are monitoring the situation for any possible sign of Death Eater involvement.’

She looked up at them and her eyes were wide and gleaming. ‘I knew it, I was right,’ she breathed. ‘Voldemort’s trying to make a biological weapon.’

‘A what?’ Ron asked, staring at her.

‘A biological weapon,’ said Hermione. ‘A disease or a germ that’ll make loads of people really sick so that they die.’

‘But it says in the article that the labs say nothing was taken,’ said Harry, pointing to a line on the paper.

‘Of course they’d say that, Harry,’ Hermione said. ‘Do you know how many laboratories there are around the world creating and breeding deadly viruses and diseases? They’re not going to want to admit it if someone, especially a wizard or a witch--half the Muggle world doesn’t even believe we exist, remember--made off with a bunch of test tubes full of Ebola or something. Think of the panic that would cause.’

‘What’s Ebola?’ Ron asked.

‘It’s a deadly virus that originated in Africa,’ said Hermione, very fast. ‘It starts in an indigenous animal and somehow infects a person, probably through a bite or a scratch. It’s not always fatal but if it does become fatal, it turns the person’s internal organs to mush and they wind up bleeding to death through all their orifices.’

‘Euh! Hermione, I’m eating here!’ Ron said, disgusted.

‘You asked,’ she said loftily.

‘So, you’re saying that Voldemort is trying to get a hold of a germ or virus and somehow spread it around and make people sick and die?’ Harry said.

‘What else could it be?’ Hermione said. ‘Think about it. Those break-ins never would have made *The Daily Prophet* if the Ministry wasn’t worried about this sort of thing.’ She stood up abruptly, folding the paper haphazardly and stuffing it into her bag.

‘I’m going to the library,’ she announced. ‘I’ll see you in lessons in a bit.’

Ron and Harry stared after her.

‘Wow,’ said Ron. ‘Once she gets on a roll--’

‘--there's no stopping her,’ said Harry.

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The promise of the first Hogsmeade weekend might normally have been an enjoyable idea for Ron, but this year it brought only aggravation.

‘I can't BELIEVE we have to baby-sit the third years,’ he grumbled to Hermione on their way to meet Katie, Eddie and the rest of the prefects. ‘How're we supposed to have any fun if we have to watch over those little toe rags?’

‘Ron!’ Hermione snapped. ‘You know why. What with Voldemort and the Death Eaters on the loose--’

‘Yeah, yeah, I know,’ Ron said sourly, adjusting his prefect badge on his robes. ‘I was just really hoping to try some fire-whisky this time around. Just kidding!’ he added when he saw her murderous look.

‘Hello, Hermione,’ came a smooth, silky voice. Ron suppressed a groan and settled for rolling his eyes, but Hermione didn't see.

‘Hi, Eddie,’ she said, beaming at him.

‘Hey, there, Weasley,’ Eddie said, smiling an oily smile. ‘Ready to play wet-nurse to the rug rats?’

‘I can hardly wait,’ Ron said through gritted teeth.

‘Hi, Ron, Hermione!’ said Katie as she entered the corridor.

‘Hey, Katie,’ said Ron. ‘Hey, I forgot to ask. Uh, how was your date with Neville, at the ball?’

‘Oh, that,’ she said, smiling. ‘We're just friends. He's a nice bloke, Neville. Bit shy, really. We had fun, though.’

The corridor was filling up with students. The caretaker, Argus Filch, came hobbling down toward the main doors followed by his scrawny, mangy-looking cat, Mrs. Norris.

‘All right, all right you lot,’ Filch snapped. ‘Line up single-file, eh? Lemme see your permission forms.’ ‘

We'll just go on ahead, Mr. Filch,' said Eddie smoothly, 'if you don't mind.'

Filch grunted something at Eddie that sounded like 'Bloody great sod' to Ron's ears. Or maybe Ron was just thinking that.

'Shall we?' Eddie asked, putting a proprietary arm around Hermione's shoulder.

'Oh, okay,' she said, blushing. Ron clenched his fists and tried not to punch the wall.

All in all the day wasn't quite as bad as Ron had feared. True, he had to endure watching Eddie's repeated attempts to lead Hermione away from the crowd, undoubtedly to somewhere more private, but Hermione dissuaded him every time, no doubt out of a sense of duty to the third years, who ran about Hogsmeade as though Christmas had come early. That, at least, was something.

Ron saw Harry and Susan Bones nearby, strolling slowly and talking. Harry was holding Susan's hand and they were both eating massive candy canes.

'Settle down, you lot!' Anthony Goldstein snapped to a group of third year Ravenclaws. 'Who wants to go to Honeydukes?'

The third years squealed an affirmative and followed Anthony and Padma into the candy shoppe.

'Having fun, Ron?' Ginny asked. She was with Dean Thomas and they were munching on Chocolate Frogs.

'Yeah, it's great,' he said. 'I get to play mummy to a bunch of third years while Eddie keeps hanging all over Hermione. At least she takes her prefect duties seriously.'

'You might quit sulking and try to talk to her,' Ginny suggested. 'Meantime, we're off.'

'Where are you going?' Ron demanded, eyeing Dean suspiciously.

'Madam Puddifoot's, for coffees,' said Ginny, rolling her eyes. 'If that's okay, DAD.'

'Ha ha,' said Ron in a bored voice. 'See you around, then.'

'Ron.' He looked up and saw that Hermione was in front of him. She looked a bit put out about something.

'What's up?' he asked.

'Eddie,' she said. 'I mean, he's nice and all but he won't leave me alone. It's starting to get on my nerves a little.'

'Ha!' Ron shouted triumphantly. Then, immediately realizing that shouting

triumphantly might look a bit bad, covered it with a rather dramatic and realistic fit of coughing.

‘Are you all right?’ Hermione asked, patting him on the back.

‘Fine,’ he pretended to choke. ‘Fine. Uh, I think Eddie's talking to Katie,’ he added, pointing. Indeed, Eddie was deep in conversation with Katie about something or other and he was leering down at her with his slick smile plastered on his face.

‘Well, he certainly looks occupied,’ said Hermione, sounding both annoyed and relieved. ‘Let's go before he sees me.’

Ron bit back another triumphant yell and instead said, ‘Hermione, we're supposed to be watching the third years, remember?’

‘I know,’ she said testily. ‘Let's take them to the Three Broomsticks, shall we? I'm freezing and could do with a butterbeer.’

‘Good idea,’ Ron said, wishing he could find a clever way to lead her off somewhere private himself so that he could tell her how he felt and get it off his chest at last.

Instead he and Hermione shouted at the Gryffindor third years to follow them to the cozy pub, which was run by Madam Rosmerta, a pretty middle-aged witch with a very warm manner. The third years spread themselves out among many tables while Ron and Hermione took a table close to the door to keep a better eye on them. Ron went to the bar, fetched two butterbeers and brought the steaming, foaming mugs back to the table. ‘Cheers,’ said Hermione, raising her glass and clinking it against his.

‘Cheers,’ he said, and he took a long swig, warmth instantly pouring down his throat and into his cold feet.

He set his mug down and Hermione giggled.

‘What?’ he asked.

‘You've got foam all over your face,’ she said, giggling again.

‘Oh,’ he said, blushing, and he wiped at his face with his sleeve.

‘You missed a spot,’ she said. ‘Here.’ She reached across the table and brushed the top of his lip with her thumb. Ron felt a jolt of electricity race up his spine. He laughed nervously. Hermione smiled; she was rather pink in the face.

‘You...you should have done that to my nose when we met on the train,’ Ron said.

‘What?’ said Hermione.

‘Remember, when we met?’ Ron said, feeling his ears get very hot again. ‘On the train to school first year? You told me I had dirt on my nose.’

‘Oh, that,’ Hermione said, blushing more deeply. ‘You remember that?’

‘Course I do,’ said Ron, looking down and laughing nervously again. ‘How could I forget that bossy little girl who had memorized all her school books? You were helping Neville look for his toad and you barged in and just started yammering on and on.’

‘I did not “yammer,”’ Hermione said with a defensive note in her voice, but she was suppressing a smile. ‘I was just very nervous, that’s all.’

‘I didn’t know geniuses could get nervous,’ Ron said, trying for a light, teasing tone and instead sounding slightly strangled by nerves.

Hermione blushed again. ‘I’m not a genius,’ she said. ‘I just...read a lot.’

They looked at each other for a long moment. Ron swallowed a lump in his throat and heard the voice in his head, the same persistent voice in his head that had been there ever since he talked to Bill, urge him yet again to tell Hermione the truth. He took a deep breath and looked around at the pub; the third years were all chattering away happily, ignoring them. Their table was small and private and it was so noisy that no one would have heard them.

Tell her, the voice urged. He took another breath and looked at her. She had a very expectant look on her face, as though she were waiting for him to say something. He took yet another breath.

‘Hermione,’ he began. ‘Um, well, there’s something...I need to tell you.’

‘Yes?’ she said, her eyes wide.

His stomach was flopping around so much that he thought it might pop out of his mouth. He swallowed again.

‘Uh, well,’ said Ron. ‘See, lately I’ve been, uh...you’ve been...well. There’s this...person, see. A girl, actually. And...and I fancy her a little. Actually, I fancy her a lot. But...she doesn’t know and I’m not really sure how to tell her. I mean...she might laugh at me or something.’

‘She wouldn’t laugh,’ Hermione said quickly, and she placed her hand over his.

Ron felt another jolt of electricity in his spine. ‘How do you know?’ he asked.

‘Because...because if she did, she’d be a really awful person,’ said Hermione.

‘She’s not an awful person,’ said Ron. ‘She’s really...she’s really cool.’

Ron mentally kicked himself. Cool? the voice inside his head raged. Cool? What about brave, or smart, or beautiful, or fun? Cool! Honestly!

‘Do I know her?’ Hermione asked, still holding his hand. Without totally realizing he

was doing it, Ron laced his fingers with hers. He was tingling all over.

‘Yeah,’ he said. His mouth going very dry, so he swallowed. ‘Anyway, I’ve been trying to come up with a way to tell her for a while but every time I do I get really nervous and choke up. But I think I’m finally ready to tell her this time.’

He took another deep breath, and reached for her other hand.

‘Hermione?’

‘Yes?’

She leaned in a little closer, and Ron could smell lilacs. He vaguely noticed that he was holding both her hands now. His heart was beating so loudly he was quite sure the whole village could hear it.

‘What I mean to say is, I really like--’ he began.

An ear-splitting scream cut him off.

‘What the--’

Ron and Hermione leapt up from the table and yanked open the door to the pub, for the scream had come from outside. The snow was glowing with a sickly green light.

‘Ron, look!’ Hermione shrieked, pointing to the sky.

Ron looked up. A huge green skull with a snake undulating in its mouth was hovering above them. Several Hufflepuffs were standing in the square, yelling and pointing up at it in terror.

‘The Dark Mark!’ Ron and Hermione yelled together.

‘Ron!’ Bill was running at them, his wand clutched in his hand, his hair falling out of his ponytail. Behind him was Professor McGonagall. ‘Get the third years back to school. Now!’

‘But--’

‘Listen to your brother, Mr. Weasley!’ McGonagall snapped, rushing after him with her own wand clutched tightly in her hand.

‘Come on, Ron!’ Hermione yelled. The third years were pouring out of the pub to see the source of the commotion. Several girls screamed and the lot of them began to run in all directions.

‘Wait!’ Ron yelled, pulling out his wand. ‘Don’t panic, you lot! Get back here!’

Hermione yanked out her wand and pointed it at a group of third years. ‘*Immobilius!*’ she shouted, and the third years froze in place, their feet as though stuck to the frozen ground. She pointed her wand at another clump of fleeing third years and performed the same spell. Then she pointed her wand at her own throat and muttered ‘*Sonorus.*’

‘Listen to me!’ she yelled, her voice magically magnified. ‘Third year Gryffindors, line up single file behind me and walk directly to the castle. Do not run and DON’T PANIC.’ She pointed her wand at her throat and muttered ‘*Quietus.*’

‘Ron,’ she snapped. ‘Bring up the rear.’

‘Right,’ said Ron, in a slight daze and impressed with Hermione’s quick thinking. ‘Third years, follow Hermione. I’m right behind you!’ he yelled.

‘*Finite,*’ Hermione said, pointing her wand at the frozen third years. They went mobile again and quickly formed a line.

‘Now let’s go!’ she shouted to them, and Ron was amazed to see that to a one they obeyed, marching almost militarily behind her in the direction of the castle. He followed behind them, wand out, his eyes scanning the square. The third years kept a brisk pace, but they didn’t run.

‘Ron!’ a female voice yelled. Ron turned and saw Ginny and Dean jogging up to them. ‘What’s going on? Who sent the Dark Mark?’

‘We don’t know,’ said Ron. ‘Just get yourselves inside, okay?’ Ginny, normally so quick to argue when Ron bossed her around, only nodded, took Dean’s hand, and together they joined the third years in line.

‘That’s it,’ Hermione was saying, and she stood to one side to let them pass through the gates onto the school grounds. Professor Sinistra was there to greet them.

‘I’ll take it from here, Miss Granger,’ she said, ushering the third years toward the castle doors.

‘Thanks, Professor,’ said Hermione, and she turned to Ron.

‘Hermione,’ said Ron, something just occurring to him. ‘Where’s Harry?’

She gasped. 'He was with Susan!'

'We have to find them,' Ron said. 'Come on!' He started back toward the square, Hermione at his heels.

'Slow down, Ron!' she yelled. 'I can't keep up with you, your damn legs are too long!'

Under normal circumstances Ron might have chuckled to hear Hermione swear, but he was too frightened right now to think of anything but finding Harry and Susan. Harry would have seen the Dark Mark; he might have even felt it coming before it did. But what if a Death Eater was nearby, or worse, some Dementors? What if Harry and Susan were trapped? What if they had been taken?

The only people left in the square now along with Ron and Hermione were the teachers; the shop-owners had all shut and locked their windows. Ron and Hermione looked around desperately, trying to discern where Harry and Susan might have gone. The Dark Mark had been erased from the sky but the green mist still hovered.

'Should we split up?' Hermione suggested.

'No way,' said Ron. 'If there are Dementors around or Death Eaters we don't want to get caught alone. Dammit! Which way did they go? I wasn't paying attention!'

'That way!' Hermione said, pointing northeast. 'I remember now. Come on!' She started to run up the High Street with Ron at her heels, and they veered right and found themselves down a narrow alleyway. The sickly green leftover mist from the Dark Mark left strange, misshapen shadows against the back walls of the shops and on the cobblestone street.

Up ahead, about a hundred feet away, Ron saw movement. Something or someone was hiding behind a huge barrel that was standing just outside Puffington's Pipe Tobacco Shop.

'Stop!' Ron snapped in a whisper; Hermione collided into him, but he was so tall he didn't move.

'What?' Hermione whispered.

'Look,' Ron hissed. 'Something's up there.'

Hermione nodded. She was white faced and looked very scared.

'Come on,' Ron whispered. 'Stay behind me.'

They crept up the alleyway slowly, not wanting to startle whatever it was that was

hiding behind the barrel. Their wands were held out in front of them. Hermione was trembling, but her wand hand was remarkably steady.

Suddenly something burst from behind the barrel--a short, squat shape that looked like that of a man. A high-pitched, reedy voice shouted '*Reducto!*' and a jet of white light shot out.

'Ron, look out!' Hermione screamed, throwing herself against him as the roof of Frobisher's Fiddle Factory exploded and brick and shingles rained down at them.

'*Wingardium Leviosa!*' Hermione yelled, pointing her wand at the rubble. It froze in mid-air.

'Come on!' Ron yelled, and he hurtled toward the short man who'd shot the Reductor Curse at them. 'He's getting away!'

'Ron, wait!' Hermione yelled, dashing after him.

Ron shot around the corner, Hermione just behind him, to see the squat man running heavily in the direction of the Forbidden Forest.

'*Stupefy!*' Ron yelled, pointing his wand at the fleeing wizard, but his spell went wide and hit a tree instead, causing the snow on it to fall with a whump. For a split second all Ron could see was white, then his eyes spotted movement on the snowy ground. But the man wasn't there. It was a rat. A very sickly looking, unhealthy rat.

'Scabbers?' said Ron, shocked, his legs no longer working. He raised his wand again but the rat skittered madly off into the forest, and in the next second Ron heard a loud bang.

'Ron!' Hermione panted, catching up with him. 'Are you mad? You might have been killed!'

'Hermione,' said Ron, turning to her. 'It was Wormtail. He was here.'

'What?'

'That man,' said Ron. 'I saw him, but then there was just a rat. It was Wormtail. I know it.'

'That's all fine and good, Ron,' said Hermione impatiently. 'But we haven't found Harry and Susan yet!'

'We're here!' a voice called. Ron and Hermione whirled around to see Harry and Susan staggering toward them. Harry looked dishevelled. There was snow in his hair and a bruise on his left cheek, and his glasses were cracked, but he was uninjured. Susan, however, was bleeding from a gash in her shoulder and walking with a pronounced limp.

'She's hurt,' Harry said, his arm around Susan's waist to keep her from falling. 'We've

got to get her to Madam Pomfrey.'

'I'm not that badly hurt,' said Susan, but she was ashen-faced and looked to be in a lot of pain.

'It was Wormtail,' said Harry. 'He was here. He attacked us and took off.'

'We saw him, too,' said Ron. 'He took off into the forest and Disapparated.'

'Let's get back to the castle,' Harry urged. 'Come on. Help me with Susan.'

'I don't need help!' Susan protested, but Ron put an arm around her waist and together he and Harry began to practically carry her in the direction of the castle. Hermione walked behind them, her wand still out.

They reached the square in time to meet Professor McGonagall and Bill.

'What are you four doing here?' McGonagall cried. Her hat had come off and her normally severely neat hair was coming out of its bun. 'I told you to get back to the castle.'

'Please, Professor,' Harry begged. 'Susan's hurt.'

'Where were you two?' she demanded, and Harry and Susan--despite the obvious pain on her face--both blushed. McGonagall's lips went very thin.

'Never mind,' she said. 'Get yourselves indoors right now and get Miss Bones to the hospital wing.'

Chapter Thirteen: Ron's Declaration

The following Monday the school was abuzz with the talk of all that had happened at Hogsmeade. Apart from Susan Bones, none of the students had been injured in the ensuing panic of seeing the Dark Mark, but all of them were scared and tightly wound.

Susan's injuries had been mended easily by Madam Pomfrey, but Harry told Ron as they sat at breakfast Monday morning that she was badly shaken but also rather angry.

'Voldemort's cronies took out some of her relatives a while back,' Harry explained. 'She's a bit spooked, I think, but she's pretty tough.'

'What were you two doing when you were attacked, anyway?' Ron asked, shovelling a huge spoonful of porridge into his mouth.

'Oh, uh,' said Harry, going red. 'Well, you know. We were just walking and uh, talking.'

'Uh huh,' said Ron through a mouthful of porridge, eyeing Harry suspiciously. Ron swallowed his bite of porridge and asked in a low voice, 'You two were snogging, weren't you?'

Harry was very red now but a grin slowly spread across his face. 'Yeah. Uh, a bit.'

'A bit?' Ron said, his eyebrows going up.

'A lot,' said Harry, his grin very wide as he stared at his eggs.

Ron took a swallow of orange juice and tried not to feel jealous.

'Excellent,' he said, clapping Harry on the back. 'How was it?'

'Good,' said Harry, still not looking at Ron.

'Better than with Cho?'

‘Way better,’ said Harry.

‘Susan didn’t cry, I take it,’ said Ron, grinning.

‘No, I’m, uh, pretty sure she had a good time,’ said Harry, looking rather pleased with himself. ‘And I definitely did. I mean, at least until Wormtail showed up, of course. Not really the ending to our date I was looking for.’

‘Speak for yourself,’ said Ron. ‘I was this close to telling Hermione about...you know...and then the stupid Dark Mark appeared. You didn’t feel it coming, by the way?’

‘Well, my scar hurt a bit, yeah, but...I was sort of in the middle of...stuff,’ said Harry. He was so red now he looked like a black-haired beet. ‘I wasn’t really paying attention to my scar.’

‘I get it,’ said Ron, grinning.

‘Good morning,’ said Hermione briskly, taking a seat across from them and pouring herself a huge cup of coffee.

‘What are you so chipper about?’ asked Ron, taking another massive bite of porridge.

‘I’m not chipper,’ said Hermione. ‘I’m just...awake, that’s all. *The Sunday Prophet* had a story about the Dark Mark showing up at Hogsmeade, you know, but there wasn’t any mention of any dark wizards or Death Eaters.’

‘They would have known if their reporters had talked to us,’ said Ron. ‘I wonder why they didn’t.’

‘Well, it all happened very fast, didn’t it?’ said Hermione. ‘The story was pretty bare bones. In any case I can’t see Dumbledore letting reporters come into the school. Not after Rita Skeeter.’

‘Speaking of Rita,’ said Harry, ‘is she back with *The Daily Prophet*? I haven’t seen any mean and nasty stories about you and me showing up.’

‘No,’ said Hermione. ‘Get this. She’s working at *The Quibbler*. You know, for Luna Lovegood’s dad. Apparently Mr. Lovegood told Rita that *The Quibbler* was the perfect place for Rita’s particular talents.’

‘What, making stuff up out of thin air?’ said Ron.

‘What Rita writes in *The Quibbler* is no more or less believable than the twenty stories a week about the missing Crumple-Horned Snorkack,’ said Hermione.

Just then a screech owl soared into the Great Hall and dropped a newspaper in Hermione's lap. She paid the owl and tore open the paper anxiously, then scanned it, her eyes moving so fast they looked almost blurred. She gasped.

‘What now?’ Harry and Ron asked at once.

‘Something about the Dark Mark?’ Harry asked.

‘No, it's worse,’ said Hermione. ‘Listen.’ She read the front page headline and article out loud.

‘According to sources close to the British, French and Scottish Prime Ministers and those governments' secret service agencies, three top Muggle scientists in those three countries have gone missing. A doctor at the Heatherington Laboratory in Edinburgh vanished, seemingly without a trace, last Tuesday or Wednesday. A scientist at the Barrow Biological Institute in London have been missing since Monday of last week, and another scientist at L'Academie des Sciences in Paris disappeared last Wednesday. Government officials, in communication with the Ministries of Magic in Britain, Scotland and France, are convinced that the scientists' disappearances are related to recent burglary attempts on those three labs less than two weeks ago. At the time all three labs maintained that nothing had been stolen during the break-ins, but *The Daily Prophet* has learned in fact that in each lab, small quantities of the Ebola virus, viral pneumonia and anthrax virus cannot be accounted for.’

Hermione took a deep breath and continued to read aloud.

‘The governments of Britain, Scotland and France all maintain that the quantities of viruses stolen are so miniscule that they could not cause any serious damage, and have reassured the Ministry of Magic that there is no cause for concern within the Magical community, and that the three governments more likely suspect a terrorist organization to be responsible. There have also been suggestions by unnamed officials in Britain that the three scientists were working together as mercenaries and used the attempted break-ins as a decoy, then absconded with the virus samples themselves and have fled to meet up with each other or with potential buyers in the bio weapons black market.’

‘In the meantime, Acting Minister of Magic Amelia Bones has been granted new powers by the Wizengamot to increase security at all public areas, government offices, banks and schools within the wizarding community. This is in response to news that the Dark Mark made an appearance in Hogsmeade Village this past Saturday during a visit by students of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The Ministry continues to urge everyone to practice extreme caution and vigilance in their daily activities and to report any suspicious behaviour to their local Department of Magical Law Enforcement.’

‘At this time both the Muggle and Magical governments insist that, based on the

evidence, there is no connection between the appearance of the Dark Mark and the events at the three laboratories.'

She stopped reading and looked up.

'I hate being right,' she said, folding the paper up and looking worried.

'You think Voldemort's behind this?' Harry asked.

'There's no other explanation,' said Hermione. 'No logical one, anyway.'

'Then why isn't the Ministry or somebody else saying something to the press?' Harry asked sceptically.

'They don't want to cause a panic, do they?' said Hermione. 'They don't have any proof, do they, that Voldemort's responsible. Just a few thin connections. And the explanation from the Muggle governments makes sense. I mean, there are lots of scientists who are on the take, creating viruses and selling them on the black market to weapons dealers or terrorist groups. It's a perfectly logical explanation.'

'How can you be so sure Voldemort's behind this, then?' said Harry. 'You don't have proof, either.'

'True,' Hermione admitted. 'But I'm telling you, he's going to be looking for a way to deal with his...Muggle problem, and developing a biological weapon is one of the most efficient ways to do it. Of course, not with the viruses he stole. Ebola and anthrax and viral pneumonia are all nasty but they wouldn't get the job done.'

'All those diseases sound pretty nasty to me,' said Ron, feeling a bit sick. 'Bleeding to death from every orifice. Yuck!'

'They are nasty, but they're not the most effective way to kill massive amounts of people,' said Hermione. 'All those viruses can spread quickly but they tend to burn out fast, too. They infect a large cluster of people, but some of them won't die, they'll just get sick for a while and then recover. Plus, there's loads of medicines and treatments for that stuff. And modern hospitals have all sorts of protocols for dealing with outbreaks of diseases like those. By the time the virus begins to really do any damage, hospitals and public health people will know about it and put up all sorts of countermeasures and treatments, and the virus will burn out. Lots of people might die, but not nearly as many as Voldemort would need to wipe out to accomplish his goals. At the very worst he'd create a temporary panic but in the end medical science would win out.'

Ron and Harry looked at each other, trying to absorb all this information.

'So, you're saying that the diseases Voldemort stole are no good?' said Ron.

'No,' said Hermione. 'They're good, if you can call deadly diseases that. I'm just saying, they're not the most effective way to wipe out whole populations. And if he's using those scientists to help him develop something stronger, he won't get very far.'

Even if he had the most advanced lab on Earth all to himself, Muggle technology just isn't going to move as fast as he wants.'

'Why not just use magic, then?' Harry said. 'It's too weird, isn't it, Voldemort trying to use Muggle stuff.'

'Not necessarily,' said Hermione. 'It makes sense. If Voldemort can find some way to spread a really deadly disease, so that it infects whole populations, he can make it look like some sort accident of nature. Who's going to suspect a wizard is behind a deadly global disease epidemic?'

'Yeah, but you just said that Muggle science doesn't work fast enough to create new viruses--' Ron began.

'Well, that's where Voldemort might bring magic into the equation,' said Hermione. 'He could have the scientists fine-tune the virus itself and then he could magically replicate it, or make it stronger or faster acting or whatever. But the problem with that is he would have to create some sort of anti-virus, to protect himself and his followers. He can't just go around letting a disease loose indiscriminately. He can't risk getting his cronies sick. Whatever he's planning is going to take a lot of work and at least some amount of time.'

'I dunno, Hermione,' said Harry dubiously. 'Voldemort isn't exactly the patient sort. I can't see him spending six months trying to come up with some disease when he can just start going around using his cronies to kill Muggles.'

'If he develops the right virus, Harry, he'll be able to kill off more Muggles in a week than he would in six months using every Dementor, giant, troll and Death Eater at his disposal,' Hermione countered. 'I'm going to the library to do a bit more research on this. And I'm going to owl mum and dad. They've got some doctor friends who might be willing to lend me copies of some Muggle medical texts. See you in Transfiguration.' She stood up and left the Great Hall carrying her huge cup of coffee and a piece of half-eaten toast in her hand, her heavy bag slung over her shoulder.

'What do you think?' said Ron, as they watched her go.

'Well, Hermione's brilliant,' said Harry, 'and she's been right about stuff before but this...it just doesn't sound like Voldemort. I mean, I kind of know the way he thinks.'

'You...you've been able to...read his thoughts then?' Ron asked. 'Using Legilimency?'

'Yeah, a bit,' said Harry. 'I mean, yeah, I did see a place that looked like a lab in that last vision. But the only other real vision I've had of Voldemort is him looking at some book, and I don't remember what the book looked like or what it was called. I mean, he could be hiding out in a lab, for all we know, and looking around for some spell book.'

'Yeah,' said Ron, glancing up at the staff table. 'Hey, where's Snape?'

Harry looked up and noticed Snape's empty seat. 'The Dark Mark, remember?' he

said. 'Snape would have felt it on his arm. He must have had to report to Voldemort. Maybe he won't come back,' he added hopefully.

'Interesting timing, isn't it?' mused Ron. 'Those diseases get stolen from the labs, the scientists disappear, the Dark Mark shows up, Wormtail shows up and Snape takes off.'

'That's weird, too,' said Harry. 'I mean, Wormtail wasn't there during that fight in the Department of Mysteries; we didn't see or hear from him at all for a year, and now he's back. He's got to have something to do with this big plan of Voldemort's, whatever it is.'

They ate the rest of their breakfast in silence, then stood up and slung their bags over their shoulders.

'Well,' said Ron bracingly. 'At least one good thing today. No Snape, no Potions lesson.'

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The next several weeks passed in almost a blur, and suddenly, it was nearly the Christmas holiday again. Harry, Ron and Hermione developed a kind of daily routine, starting with reading *The Daily Prophet* from cover to cover. Hermione wrote her parents and asked them to send her copies of *The London Times*, a major Muggle daily that would tell them a lot more about the happenings in the Muggle world. Harry had begun a journal in the hopes of chronicling every vision or twinge of Voldemort he might get. Hermione was spending more time in the library researching bizarre diseases than she was on her schoolwork but still somehow managed to finish it and continue to get top marks. Harry reported that Voldemort had gotten angry a few times, but it was frustration, not rage, which Harry took to mean that his progress with making an effective virus was thus far not going as well as he'd hoped. A report in *The London Times* indicated that several students at Oxford had gotten ill from an outbreak of meningitis, but that the outbreak had been contained and nobody had died. Every day, they waited for something to happen, some ball to drop, but it never did.

In the meantime, Dumbledore had issued new restrictions and rules for the students in the wake of the attack in Hogsmeade.

Future Hogsmeade visits were to be restricted to fifth years and above. Aurors had been posted on school grounds and inside Hogsmeade. All students under fifth year had to be escorted to and from classes by a teacher or prefect and all students under fifth year had to be in their common rooms by seven o'clock every evening. Curfews and bedtimes were being strictly observed. Exceptions were made only for members of the Quidditch teams and for D.A. meetings.

The new rules severely cramped the social lifestyles of the students, but nowhere was it worse than for couples, who suddenly found their privacy greatly hampered. This lack of privacy led to an astonishing number of detentions among students. Every day at least one couple was caught in a classroom or broom closet. Several boys were caught trying to enter the girls' dormitories, but any time boys tried to climb the stairs,

loud alarm bells would shriek and the steps leading to girls' rooms would turn into slides, which not only sent boys tumbling but prevented their entry and landed them in detention.

It got to the point where one morning at breakfast McGonagall stood up and announced, in her most aggravated voice, 'If one more couple is found *fraternizing* in the classrooms, offices, corridors, Quidditch tents, library stacks, closets, or rooms that magically appear behind the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy, they will receive a week's worth of detentions and lose 10 points each for their house!'

Quidditch matches went on as normal, although students were escorted in strict formations to and from the matches. Gryffindor flattened Hufflepuff rather easily in their match; Susan was none too pleased that her house lost and Harry seemed surprisingly reluctant to tease her about it. Slytherin played Ravenclaw and narrowly defeated them, leaving Slytherin and Gryffindor in a race for the Cup.

Two days before Christmas Eve nearly all the Gryffindors had left Hogwarts. Hermione was still there, waiting to be picked up by her father the following evening.

Ron was in such a state about Wormtail, Voldemort's plans, Harry's visions--or lack thereof--and of course, his feelings for Hermione that he didn't even get upset when Ginny told him that their parents had given her permission to spend the Christmas holiday with Dean Thomas and his family ('Dad probably wants me to owl him every fifteen minutes and tell him something else about Muggle stuff,' said Ginny).

It was just after dinner the night before Christmas Eve when Ron finally determined that tonight had to be the night. He simply had to come clean with Hermione. He spent the better part of the day preparing himself, writing down a speech on a scrap of parchment and carrying it with him everywhere he went, trying to memorize the words.

He entered the common room and found it empty. Dobby the house elf seemed to believe that extra decorations for the common room were in order. As such, the room was filled with streamers, tinsel, ribbons, candles, and hanging from the ceiling were dozens of sprigs of mistletoe, so many that the ceiling was hardly visible. In a corner near the fireplace was Hermione's trunk, already packed.

Ron flopped into his favourite chair in front of the fire, waiting for Hermione to show up and hoping that when she did, the common room was still empty.

He pulled out the ragged piece of parchment, staring down at the words he had written, and re-written, and re-written again.

'Hermione, I just want you to know that I think you're a really special person. You're my best friend in the world, next to Harry, of course, but I have come to fancy you a lot and I was hoping you felt the same way about me. You're smart and talented and really pretty, too, and I'd be really happy if you went out with me.'

He was reciting them out loud to himself in a kind of half-dazed state and didn't notice Hermione come into the common room.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked.

‘What?’ Ron was so startled he leapt up from the chair and accidentally let go of the piece of parchment. He felt his stomach drop like lead to his feet as the parchment drifted into the fireplace, where it caught.

‘Oh, no!’ he yelled, panicking. He fumbled around for his wand but then remembered he had left it upstairs on his nightstand.

‘It’s all right!’ said Hermione. ‘*Accio* parchment!’

‘NO!’ Ron yelled, making a dive for the parchment as it zoomed toward Hermione, still burning. His fingers closed around it but touched the flame.

‘OW!’ he yelled.

‘Ron, what are you doing?’ Hermione cried, waving her wand at the parchment and putting out the fire. The parchment floated to the ground, half charred, the words obscured with ash.

‘Uh, nothing,’ said Ron, sucking on his burned fingers.

‘What is this?’ Hermione asked, picking up the parchment and unfolding it.

‘Nothing!’ Ron said quickly, snatching it out of her hand. ‘Uh, just some...uh...leftover History of Magic notes.’

Hermione laughed out loud. ‘Since when did YOU start taking notes in History of Magic?’

‘Since...since before,’ said Ron, trying to summon indignation but only succeeding in sounding desperate.

‘Okay then,’ said Hermione, rolling her eyes and smiling. ‘You should go to Madam Pomfrey and get those fingers looked at.’

‘It’s nothing,’ Ron said, forcing a jaunty sort of smile.

‘Are you okay, Ron?’ Hermione asked. ‘You’re acting a bit strange.’

‘I’m fine,’ said Ron, his voice a bit higher than normal. ‘Just, uh, you know, relaxing by the fire.’

‘Uh huh,’ said Hermione, looking suspicious, but she gave up on it and instead looked around the common room.

‘Look at this place,’ she said sadly. ‘Why do the house elves do this, I ask you? I keep meaning to make more elf hats but I never have time anymore. And S.P.E.W. has completely fallen by the wayside. Oh well. This place looks ridiculous, though,

doesn't it? All this mistletoe. Honestly. Did you know mistletoe is actually poisonous?’

‘What?’ Ron asked, for he had not really taken in a word Hermione had just said, because he just noticed that her hair was curly again--apparently whatever she had done to straighten it over the summer was wearing off. But instead of looking bushy it was a mass of very lovely, soft looking ringlets.

‘I said, did you know mistletoe is poisonous?’ she repeated, looking slightly exasperated.

‘Oh, you don't say?’ Ron said, his heart racing.

‘Oh!’ she said suddenly. ‘I just remembered why I came in here. I was going to give you and Harry your Christmas gifts before I go. Dad will be here to pick me up soon.’

She hurried up the stairs to the girls' dormitory. At the same moment, Ron realized he had left Hermione's present upstairs. He raced up to the dorm room and opened the door and stopped in his tracks.

Harry and Susan were there, on Harry's bed. Books were spread out all over it; clearly the two of them had been studying, but judging by the position they were in now, and by the activity they were engaged in, Ron quickly guessed they had abandoned studying a while ago.

Susan was pressed back against the pillows, her legs were stretched out over Harry's lap, and Harry was leaning over her; they were kissing very enthusiastically. Ron stood there frozen for a moment, unsure of what to do. It was only when Harry started to kiss Susan's neck and she giggled that Ron seemed to snap out of his stupor.

‘Uh,’ he said dumbly, and he turned away from the spectacle.

‘Oh!’ Susan gasped, pulling away from Harry and leaping up from the bed. She immediately began smoothing her mussed hair and clothes. Her face was very flushed.

‘Ron,’ Harry growled, looking both distinctly put out and rather flushed in the face himself. His shirt was untucked and his glasses askew.

‘Sorry,’ said Ron, looking at the floor and feeling incredibly stupid. Harry stood up and ran a hand through his hair and straightened his glasses. He looked very frustrated. Ron could guess just why, and felt even stupider.

‘I was just, uh...well, I’ll just be going to the library,’ said Susan, blushing furiously. ‘See you later, Harry. Ron.’

She gave Harry a quick peck on the cheek, picked up her books from the bed and practically dashed out of the dorm room, leaving Ron and Harry alone.

‘Thanks, mate,’ said Harry dryly, rolling his eyes.

‘Sorry,’ said Ron. ‘I’m really sorry. I didn’t even know you were up here.’

‘I know,’ said Harry, waving his hand, looking a bit less annoyed. ‘We came up here to study and...just sort of...got into it.’ He tucked his shirt back into his trousers.

‘Studying,’ said Ron, laughing nervously. ‘What were you studying, her tonsils?’

Harry punched Ron in the arm. ‘Sod off,’ he said.

‘Sorry, couldn’t resist,’ said Ron.

‘What are you doing up here, anyway?’

‘Oh!’ said Ron, having forgotten about why he’d come upstairs in the aftermath of seeing Harry and Susan snogging. ‘Uh, Hermione’s present.’

‘Ah,’ said Harry, grinning. ‘Right. Well, I think I’ll go to the library, too. Give you two a chance to be alone.’

‘Prat,’ said Ron, punching Harry in the arm. ‘Don’t go snogging Susan in the library or you’ll get detention.’

Harry laughed--a rare but very genuine laugh--picked up his books, and left the room.

Ron opened his desk drawer and grabbed a small wooden box that he then shoved into the pocket of his trousers. He then pulled out the crumpled piece of parchment in the hopes of giving what he had written a last minute once over.

‘Oh no!’ To his horror, most of the words had burned away. It was too late to try and reconstruct the words he'd written. He'd just have to improvise and hope he didn't sound too stupid. He heard Hermione calling him from downstairs.

‘Bloody hell,’ he muttered, and he rushed out of the dorm room and hurtled down the stairs where he collided with Hermione, who was coming up.

‘Oh!’ she cried, stumbling.

‘Sorry!’ Ron yelled, grabbing her around the waist to keep her from falling. He whirled around and somehow found himself on a stair just below the one on which she stood. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Fine,’ she said, sounding a bit annoyed. ‘What are you doing?’

‘I was just...getting your present,’ he said quickly. ‘I wanted to make sure you had it before you left.’

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘I just left yours and Harry's on the table over there,’ she added, indicating the two brightly wrapped packages on the coffee table.

‘Thanks,’ he said. ‘Uh, here's yours. I...I sort of forgot to wrap it, though. Sorry.’ He withdrew the small wooden box and handed it to her.

‘Thanks.’ She took the box, her fingers brushing his, and he felt a jolt of electricity race up his spine and into...other areas. She was standing very close to him. It was a very narrow staircase. Ron could smell lilacs in her hair.

She opened the box and gave a little gasp.

‘Ron, it's lovely!’ she said, taking out of the box a small silver bracelet charm in the shape of an otter.

‘Really?’ he asked, and he was suddenly talking very fast. ‘You don’t think it’s too goofy or anything? I mean, I thought, you know, your Patronus is an otter, so you must like otters, right? Not that a bracelet charm can protect you against a Dementor but you know...’

‘I love it,’ she said, putting her arms around his shoulders. Ron felt his stomach leap into his throat and he put his arms around her waist. The scent of lilacs was making him a bit dizzy.

She gave him a kiss on the cheek and then pulled back, taking a single step away (there was really nowhere for her to go on such a narrow staircase). With Ron standing on the step below her, their faces were on a level. She was very close, and he smelled chocolate on her breath again. He wondered if she ate as many Chocolate Frogs as he did. Was it his imagination or was she getting closer? Her face was blurry...

‘OW!’ Ron jerked back and immediately banged his head into the wall. ‘OW!’ he yelled again. At the rate he was injuring himself he’d break a leg next.

‘What happened?’ Hermione cried.

‘Something fell in my eye,’ Ron said, blinking furiously and rubbing at his left eye with one hand and the back of his head with the other.

‘Don’t do that, you’ll scratch your eye,’ scolded Hermione, grabbing his wrist. ‘Hold still, I’ll get it.’

He stood still, lowering his hands, as Hermione leaned in to look at his eye, which stung and was probably ugly-looking and bloodshot.

‘I see it,’ she said. ‘It looks like a bit of mistletoe.’

‘Great,’ Ron said. ‘Isn’t it poisonous?’

‘Only if you eat it,’ said Hermione. ‘Don’t move.’ Very lightly she brushed her finger across his eyelashes, then gently pulled the piece of mistletoe from them.

‘Got it,’ she said, and she flicked it away.

‘Thanks,’ he said, blinking furiously, his eye streaming.

‘You’re welcome,’ she said. ‘How’s your head?’

‘Fine,’ he started to say, but she had reached behind his head to find the spot where he’d banged it, and began to lightly rub the tender lump that was beginning to form there.

They looked at each other for a long moment. Her fingers were coiled in his hair. His heart was pounding. Whatever she was doing with her fingers felt very good.

‘It's really poisonous, you know,’ Hermione said in a very soft voice. ‘Mistletoe.’ She was still stroking his hair.

‘You mentioned that,’ Ron said, staring at her eyes. He could see his reflection in them.

‘It's ironic, isn't it?’ she said, taking a step closer to him.

‘What's ironic?’ Ron asked, in a kind of strangled whisper.

‘That you're supposed to kiss someone when you stand under mistletoe,’ she said, her cheeks turning pink. ‘Even though it's poisonous.’

‘Yeah,’ said Ron, leaning forward just slightly. ‘What...what kind of weirdo came up with that idea, kissing under mistletoe?’

She was so close. Her lips were inches away. He was dying to kiss her. He didn't think he had the nerve.

‘I don't know,’ she said, her voice barely a whisper. ‘You never told me...you know...what you started to tell me. That day in Hogsmeade.’

‘Oh, that,’ said Ron, feeling heat creeping up his back, his face. ‘Uh, well, I guess what I meant to say was...’ His voice trailed off and his hand somehow found its way to her face and rested against her jaw.

‘Yes?’ she asked, and he blinked when she put her hand on the centre of his chest, just over his racing heart. Whoa.

‘I forgot,’ he said, and he found his nerve. He kissed her.

He vaguely heard a sharp intake of breath, but he wasn't sure if it was him or Hermione. Whatever. He had never experienced anything like this. It was strange and terrifying and wonderful. His stomach was doing back-flips and his hands tingled as they moved to stroke her hair; it was springy and soft in his hands. He felt a little jolt up his spine and his whole body began to tingle like mad as she sank against him and gave a little sigh. Then he felt her lips part slightly and he opened his mouth and tentatively pressed his tongue inside; his knees nearly gave out when he felt her tongue brush his.

She broke away and only then Ron realized he hadn't taken a breath in almost a minute. He gasped.

‘Whoa,’ he said, his voice sounding funny in his ears, his vision swirling.

‘Ron,’ Hermione stammered. His eyes seemed to clear and he looked at her face. Her

lips were very red from kissing and she was flushed. He was suddenly aware that she was in his arms, that he was practically holding her up. Their foreheads were touching.

'I love you,' Ron blurted. The words tumbled out of him before he quite realized he was saying them.

'Wh-what?'

'I love you,' he said again, amazed at himself, even more amazed that he meant it. And then the words came out in a rush. 'I'm mad about you, 'Mione. I have been ever since you told me I had dirt on my nose. Ever since...since the day you lied to McGonagall about the troll in the bathroom. I love how your hair gets frizzy when it rains and the way you nag me about my homework and...and...how brilliant you are...and how you stand up for people and...how you knit those stupid elf hats and made me and Harry join *spew*...and I love how you're brave and loyal and...your eyes are so pretty and...and...I'm just this poor, stupid, ugly git and I can't make up poetry like Shakespill and I can't buy you fancy stuff...and...and god, I sound like a complete idiot right now and I'm not making any sense and...I love how your lips taste like chocolate and...oh god...I really want to kiss you again...'

'Ron, shut up,' said Hermione suddenly, and she kissed him, long and slow, effectively putting an end to his clumsy declaration. Ron didn't mind, because his arms were around her waist and she was pressing against him and he felt those wonderful soft breasts of hers against his chest. He was dizzy and tingling everywhere and her hands were tangled in his hair and the kiss was hot and her lips and tongue were soft and tasted bloody fantastic.

'...you have a good trip, Dr. Granger?'

Hermione yanked herself away from Ron.

'My dad's here!' she whispered frantically, and dashed down the stairs, smoothing her hair where Ron's fingers had tangled it.

Ron blinked, trying to come back to earth. His knees gave out and he sank to the stone steps, landing hard on his tailbone, but he hardly felt it. He managed to put an impassive look on his face just as Hermione's father, Doctor Granger, entered the common room.

'Hi, Dad!' Hermione said in an unnaturally squeaky voice as the slight, thin man who was her father stepped to the centre of the room. Next to him was Professor McGonagall.

‘Hello, dear,’ he said, hugging her. He looked up at the staircase. ‘Hello, Ron.’

‘Hi, Dr. Granger,’ he said, his voice cracking horribly.

‘Have a cold there?’ Dr. Granger asked.

‘No sir,’ Ron said quickly. ‘Just fine, sir.’

Dr. Granger smiled and turned back to Hermione. ‘Don’t you look pretty today, Hermione,’ he said fondly. ‘Have you been outside? You look a bit flushed.’

Hermione and Ron both burst into terrified laughter. ‘Uh, yes, Dad, outside. That must be it. That must be why I’m...flushed.’ Hermione flashed her father a rather huge smile. McGonagall’s eyes went from Ron to Hermione and back again, and her lips went thin.

The portrait hole creaked again, and Harry crawled through.

‘Hi, Dr. Granger,’ he said as he entered the common room.

‘Harry, good to see you!’ said Dr. Granger heartily. ‘You and Ron sticking around here for the holidays, are you?’

‘Yeah,’ said Harry.

‘Well, don’t get into too much trouble,’ Dr. Granger said, giving Harry a chuck in the ribs with his elbow. He laughed. ‘Teenage boys, always getting into mischief. Am I right, Ron?’

‘Right you are, sir!’ Ron said in a loud voice. Harry stared at him.

‘You feeling all right there, Ron?’ Dr. Granger asked, taking a few steps toward him. ‘You look a bit flushed yourself.’

‘Oh, THAT,’ said Ron. ‘Uh, I’ve just been outside myself. You know. The cold. Makes me look...flushed.’

Dr. Granger smiled and turned to Hermione.

‘Are you all packed, dear?’

‘Yes, Dad,’ she said. ‘My trunk’s already down here, actually. I brought it down this morning.’ She pointed to her trunk, which was tucked in the corner near the fireplace.

‘Excellent,’ said Dr. Granger. ‘We ought to get a move on. We’ve got a flight to catch. I’ll leave you to say good-bye to your friends, shall I?’

‘Please, allow me, Dr. Granger,’ said Professor McGonagall, shooting Ron a very

penetrating look. She pointed her wand at Hermione's trunk and said '*Locomotor* trunk!' The trunk levitated and then floated toward her.

'Incredible,' said Dr. Granger, giving McGonagall an admiring smile, and he followed her out of the common room with the trunk floating between them.

The portrait hole closed and Ron and Hermione both let out a huge breath.

Harry looked from one to the other and back. He started to say something but then Hermione threw her arms around him and said, in an abnormally bright voice, 'Well, goodbye, Harry! Happy Christmas! I've left your present on the table right there. You can open it tomorrow.'

Ron had somehow managed to find his legs again and walked slowly down the stairs. His brain was still reeling and his lips were tingling.

'Uh, 'bye, Hermione,' said Harry, looking rather non-plussed.

Hermione turned to Ron. They both looked at each other and blushed, then she smiled with something like glee and hugged him rather fervently.

'Bye, Ron,' she said. 'Happy Christmas. See you soon. Thanks for the charm!' She kissed him quickly on the cheek and just a bit longer on the lips, then she waved at them both and hurried out of the common room.

Harry watched her go, then turned to Ron, who was standing there slack-jawed.

'Ha!' Harry said, slapping Ron on the back. 'You finally told her, didn't you?'

Ron stared at Harry, then back at the spot where Hermione had just been standing. He touched his lips, which were still tingling. His bruised head and scratched eye and burned fingers were forgotten. He had kissed Hermione. Twice. When he spoke his voice was full of awe.

'I did. Blimey.'

## *Chapter Fourteen: Mrs. Weasley's Surprise*

On Christmas morning Harry and Ron awoke to bright sunlight and frost on the windows.

They sat by the fire fifteen minutes later, opening their presents.

‘Another maroon jumper from Mum,’ Ron said, shaking his head. ‘I’m going to have fifty of these things before she realizes I hate maroon.’

‘Good pies, though,’ said Harry, munching on an apple crumble Mrs. Weasley had made. ‘Look at this, from Fred and George. *New and Improved Skiving Snackbox*.’

‘New and improved probably means you explode out of both ends instead of just puking,’ Ron said, screwing up his face in disgust.

‘Either that or you end up with boils on your privates,’ said Harry.

‘I wonder if they still test their stuff on themselves or if they’ve found some idiots to do it for them,’ Ron mused, opening up his present from the twins. ‘Oh nice, they got me a fake wand that turns into a...EW!’ He dropped the fake wand, which was no longer a wand at all. ‘Looks like a giant bogey.’

Ron and Harry proceeded to open the rest of their gifts. Ron had given Harry several bags full of Bertie Botts’ Every Flavor Beans and a handsome, if rather old, broomstick cover. Harry gave Ron a new Chudley Cannons poster and a pocket-sized Foe Glass.

Hermione had gotten Harry a handsome silver quill that only needed re-inking once a day.

‘Typical,’ said Harry, smiling. ‘Something to do homework with.’

‘Yeah, she got me a book,’ Ron said. ‘It’s about the history of the Chudley Cannons--you two must have planned this.’

‘No way,’ said Harry. ‘You know I’d never buy you a book, even if it is about Quidditch.’

‘Oh, well,’ said Ron, flipping through the pages of the book, feeling a bit disappointed. ‘I guess since she bought this before...you know...’

‘You two attacked each other on the staircase,’ interrupted Harry, smirking.

‘You should talk,’ Ron shot back.

Harry chucked a handful of Bertie Botts’ beans at him. Ron caught one and threw it back; it bopped Harry on the nose.

‘Knock it off,’ said Harry, laughing. Ron grinned. It was good to hear Harry laughing for a change.

‘Well, you’re certainly in a better mood since you started snogging Susan, anyway,’ Ron noted.

‘Yeah, like you haven’t been walking round grinning like an idiot since you snogged Hermione,’ Harry countered.

‘Yeah, well,’ said Ron, shrugging. ‘Would have been better if her dad hadn’t interrupted us.’

‘Now you know how it feels,’ said Harry pointedly.

‘Look, how was I supposed to know you two were getting into it?’ said Ron. ‘It could have just as easily been Seamus or Dean or Neville.’

‘Seamus is always off snogging Lavender and Neville’s always off snogging that plant of his,’ said Harry. ‘And Dean is off snogging Ginny.’

‘That is NOT funny,’ said Ron, screwing up his face in distaste.

‘Sorry,’ said Harry, grinning in a way that showed he wasn’t sorry at all.

‘Prat,’ Ron muttered, taking a handful of beans. ‘So, you and Susan...have you...I mean...what...’ His voice died and he looked away. ‘Never mind,’ he added. It wasn’t really his business anyway.

‘A little beyond kissing,’ said Harry, pursing his lips and blushing.

‘Oh,’ said Ron, his imagination working to figure out just what ‘a little beyond kissing’ might mean. He bit his lip to keep from asking any more prying questions.

‘She’s...soft...Susan, I mean,’ said Harry, after a moment’s silence, silence which Ron had thought signalled the end of this conversation. But Harry seemed to want to talk, and Ron was inclined to let him.

‘She’s soft,’ Ron repeated. ‘Uh, what do you mean by that, exactly?’ He was feeling distinctly uncomfortable, but he felt compelled to ask all the same.

‘I dunno,’ said Harry. ‘She’s just soft. And...and warm. Like...when...we kiss. It’s just soft, you know? It’s nice. Like...life isn’t so hard and cold...when I’m with her. Everything feels...soft and warm. And good.’ He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He wouldn’t look at Ron. ‘I dunno what the hell I’m trying to say.’ He was red in the face.

Ron watched his best mate for a moment. Harry had had a very mean, hard life, from the moment his parents had been murdered, up through losing Sirius. And everything in between. His horrible relatives, who’d abused him, if not with fists, then with words and coldness. The burden of being famous when he’d never asked for it. Having a psychopathic Dark Wizard out to murder him. Being known as The Boy Who Lived instead of simply being Harry.

Ron had long felt that he wasn’t quite enough of a friend to Harry. Not because of anything he did or didn’t do, but because Harry closed himself off so much. There had always been a small part of Harry that was unreachable, except that Ron was only now beginning to notice it and understand it. Now Harry had found someone who could give him what Ron--and Hermione, for that matter-- obviously could not. Susan was a soft, warm presence in Harry’s otherwise cold, hard life.

‘I know,’ said Ron. ‘What you’re trying to say.’ He didn’t look at Harry when he said this.

‘Thanks,’ Harry mumbled. Ron could tell even without looking that Harry was looking someplace else.

‘Don’t mention it,’ said Ron, knowing that Harry wouldn’t.

There was an uncomfortable silence and Ron pointedly looked back at the book Hermione had given him. He was flipping through the pages of the book when something fluttered out of it.

‘What’s this?’ he wondered aloud, stooping to pick it up.

‘Looks like a Chocolate Frog card,’ said Harry.

Ron turned it over and examined it. ‘Blimey!’ he breathed. ‘It’s Ptolemy! I’ve been looking for this card for ages. Maybe...I wonder if Hermione...’

Ron opened the book to the front cover and found a neatly penned note from Hermione.

*Dear Ron:*

*I would have written this note on the Chocolate Frog card enclosed inside this book but then I realized that might make you mad, since a Ptolemy card is supposed to be quite a valuable collectible. In any case, I do hope you make the effort to read about the history of your favourite Quidditch team; I did and I must say it’s really rather fascinating.*

*Happy Christmas.*

*Love, Hermione*

*P.S. I ate the Chocolate Frog. I hope you don’t mind.*

*P.P.S. Perhaps I am being forward but I had the sense that you were about to tell me that day in Hogsmeade that you fancied me. At least that’s what I hope you were going to tell me. If not, then forget I ever wrote this part. If so, then I fancy you, too.*

Ron grinned. ‘That girl is bloody brilliant.’

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At the midday meal Ron, Harry and Susan all sat together, eating heartily and comparing presents. Ron found Susan to be fun and pleasant, although he found the way Harry gazed at her, his eyes taking on a kind of loving, puppy-dog quality, a bit off-putting. Then Ron realized that he’d probably been making puppy-dog eyes at

Hermione all year and thought he oughtn't be so judgmental. And Harry did look genuinely happy with her, which pleased Ron no end.

They were just finishing up pudding when a large owl flew into the Great Hall, carrying a letter in its beak. It dropped the letter into Ron's lap, turned, and soared away, not even waiting to get paid.

‘What's this?’ Ron asked. ‘There's not supposed to be any post today.’

He looked at the letter to make sure it was addressed to him and saw that it was marked URGENT. He opened it slowly, wondering if it might be some prank letter from Fred and George.

It wasn't. It was a neatly written, very brief letter in his mother's hand.

Dear Ronnie,

‘I hate when she calls me that,’ Ron grumbled.

Your father and I have had to cut our trip to Romania to visit Charlie short. Charlie's workload has been extremely heavy for the past year and he was called back in early from his holiday. As such, your father and I will be coming to Hogwarts to spend the holidays with you and Harry. I hope you don't mind. I've written to Bill and he's decided to stay at Hogwarts as well, and Fred and George will be joining us. It's a shame Ginny can't be there but the Thomases are a very nice family and your father hears from Ginny three times a day about all sorts of Muggle things.

The other reason I'm writing is that I have a big surprise for you! It's really wonderful news and I can't wait to share it with you. We'll be coming to Hogwarts by Knight Bus tomorrow evening. I can't wait to see you.

Love,

Mum

‘What's up?’ Harry asked.

‘Well, looks like Mum and Dad will be joining us tomorrow,’ said Ron. ‘And Fred and George. I don't know what she's on about with this surprise. Must be a big deal if she won't put it in writing.’

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Susan went home the following day to spend the New Year's celebrations with her family. Harry seemed a bit deflated after she left, but Ron couldn't help but feel a little better now that she wasn't there to take up all of Harry's time. At least Harry and Ron were now in the same boat, lacking girlfriends and snogging opportunities.

The twins arrived early that afternoon, having decided to get there on their brand new Firebolts, purchased with profits from the joke shop. What had started out as a means

of showing off their good fortune and flashy broomsticks and clothes to Ron wound up being a comical mistake, for by the time the twins touched down on the Hogwarts grounds their faces were numb and blue from the cold. They were so stiff with cold that Harry and Ron had to thaw them out with Warming Charms.

A little while later, after they snacked on leftover Christmas candy, they went outside again to play a little Quidditch. Bill joined in, but pretty soon it devolved into a flying snow-ball fight when Fred and George started conjuring up massive snowballs and hurling them at Harry and Ron.

An hour before dinner they all returned to the castle to shower and change. Ron was inspired to finally use the Prefects' Bathroom, having learned about its massive, pool sized tub and its dozens of different bath foams.

'Being a prefect does have its privileges,' he said loftily to Fred and George and Harry, all of whom made retching noises. Harry seemed particularly smug about something or other, but Ron ignored him and took off for the bathrooms, greatly looking forward to the experience.

He reached the bathrooms, uttered the password ("Lemon fresh") and entered. It was an impressive room, with huge tubs the size of small pools and a single, huge painting of a sleeping mermaid on the wall. She looked nothing like a real mermaid.

Ron turned on the various taps and tested several of the different bath foams, finally settling on one that smelled of pine needles (the others were far too flowery and girly), then quickly stripped off his clothes and hopped into the tub. The water was hot, but not too hot. Ron floated around in the water and let the heat of it loosen some of the knots in his muscles, knots he'd gotten from playing Quidditch in the cold. He dunked his head and re-emerged, wiping soapy water from his eyes, and then leaned back against the porcelain tile.

He felt drowsy and closed his eyes; he knew he shouldn't fall asleep in the tub, but the water was soothing and the pine needle scent was pleasant. He let his mind drift, and in a kind of half-awake state, he let himself think about Hermione. He wondered if she used the Prefects' Bathroom, then felt heat flood his neck and face. Somehow thinking about Hermione in the bath was not exactly soothing. He didn't relish the idea of creating...tension for himself, so he tried to think of other things, but somehow Hermione kept intruding.

He was just thinking about her chocolate-flavoured lips when he heard a loud sniff behind him.

Ron sat up and his eyes flew open.

‘Who’s there?’ he snapped, but he felt very vulnerable. He was naked and his wand was piled on top of his clothes.

‘I thought you were someone else,’ said a mopey female voice.

Ron whirled around, the water splashing everywhere.

‘M-Myrtle!’ he gasped, and he quickly sank into the water to his chin.

‘Hello,’ said Moaning Myrtle, grinning wickedly.

‘Bloody hell!’ Ron yelled, swirling some of the bubbles around; they were so thick that Myrtle couldn’t really see anything. But still...

‘I was wondering when you’d come in here,’ she said.

‘You--you’ve been in here before?’ Ron spluttered.

‘Oh, plenty of times,’ said Myrtle. ‘Didn’t Harry tell you? I saw him in here once, in fourth year. When he was trying to work out that egg puzzle.’

‘Harry never mentioned it,’ said Ron darkly. ‘Look, do you mind? I’m a little...underdressed at the moment.’

‘Oh, don’t worry,’ said Myrtle. ‘I haven’t really seen too much. I closed my eyes after you took off your shirt.’

‘Gee, thanks,’ said Ron, quite certain she was lying.

‘I was getting so bored of everyone else,’ said Myrtle, smiling lazily at him.

‘You come in here often, do you?’ said Ron. ‘Spy on people while they bathe?’

‘Sometimes,’ she said, ‘but you’re the only other person I’ve talked to except for Harry.’

‘How nice,’ said Ron sarcastically. ‘I feel so special, really.’

‘I’m glad you feel special,’ said Myrtle. ‘I never feel special.’ Her ghostly eyes filled with tears.

‘Don’t do that, Myrtle,’ said Ron quickly.

‘Why not?’ she wailed. ‘Nobody comes to see me anymore. I’m all alone in my toilet!’

‘Well, uh, we’re not...allowed up there anymore,’ said Ron quickly.

‘Oh,’ said Myrtle, and she stopped crying at once. She smiled. ‘Well, in that case, I’ll just let you finish your bath, then.’

‘I’m quite finished, thanks,’ said Ron, making a mental note never to darken the door of the Prefects’ Bathroom again. ‘Do you mind? I need to get out now.’

‘I don’t mind,’ said Myrtle.

‘Well, close your eyes, then!’ said Ron sharply. ‘And no peeking!’

‘I won’t,’ said Myrtle, covering up her glasses with her hands. Ron leapt out of the tub, soap still in his hair, and dove for his towel, which he wrapped around himself quickly. He pulled on his shirt without bothering to dry off. He heard Myrtle giggle.

‘Hey!’ he yelled. She quickly covered her eyes again. Ron grabbed his boxer shorts and pulled them up. He tried to be careful about it but the towel slipped.

‘Oooh!’ Myrtle cooed. ‘I’ve never seen a FRECKLED bum before!’

‘MYRTLE!’ Ron yelped, yanking up his shorts.

‘It’s so cute!’ she said, giggling uncontrollably.

‘Oh my god,’ Ron said, horrified, and without even bothering to put on the rest of his clothes, he grabbed his things and tore out of the Prefects’ Bathroom, barefoot, leaving a trail of soap bubbles and water in his wake.

He burst into the common room a few minutes later, panting and furious and half dressed and still coated in bath bubbles. He strode right up to Harry, ignoring the guffaws of Fred and George, and bellowed in his face.

‘Why didn’t you tell me Myrtle goes in there!?’

Harry fell to guffawing with the twins.

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Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were due to arrive shortly and Ron, after enduring ten minutes of jeers from Fred and George for having been caught in the altogether by Myrtle, changed into jeans and a jumper, towelled off his hair and headed down to the Great Hall with Harry to meet his parents.

‘Nice outfits,’ Ron said, smirking at the twins. They were wearing black leather jeans, dragon-skin boots and luridly colored shirts. ‘What are you trying to do, dress like Bill?’

‘Bill’s gotten soft in the fashion department,’ said George, eyeing Bill’s rather conservative jeans and heavy wool jumper with disdain. ‘He looks like a ruddy Irish fisherman. All he needs is a pipe and a yellow raincoat. Even the earring got tame.’

Just then voices could be heard in the hallway. Professor McGonagall was talking to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and seemed very pleased about something.

They entered the Great Hall. Mrs. Weasley saw her sons and Harry and gave a yelp of delight, hugging all of them in turn.

‘Mum,’ said Fred as she crushed him against her, ‘we just saw you last week.’

‘Oh, hush up,’ she said, swatting him. ‘Let me look at you, Ronnie. Did you get even taller? You’re as tall as Bill. And Bill, I hear he’s the most popular teacher in the school. Oh, well, and you of course, Minerva.’

Professor McGonagall smiled a very thin-lipped smile. ‘I believe I’ll go and fetch Severus and Albus.’

‘Professor Snape’s back?’ Harry asked, a bit sharply.

‘Yes, I’m afraid he is, Mr. Potter,’ said McGonagall coolly. ‘He’s been away for far too long and his Potions lessons are very behind. You’ll all need to do a lot of catching up, if you know what I mean.’ She gave Harry and Ron and knowing look and swept out of the room. They nodded glumly. They needed to be up to date on Potions if they wanted careers as Aurors. Still, six weeks without Potions had been something of a godsend for them, not only for the extra time it gave them to study (which Hermione forced them to do) but because it meant that they hadn’t gotten any detentions or lost points, as they always did, in Snape’s lessons. ‘Wonder what he was doing all this time,’ Harry muttered under his breath.

‘Dunno,’ Ron whispered. ‘Must have been serious.’

‘Hullo, Harry,’ Mr. Weasley said heartily, shaking Harry’s hand. He gave Ron a brief hug, clapping him on the back.

‘So what's this big surprise, Mum?’ Ron asked.

‘Oh, yes!’ Mrs. Weasley said excitedly. ‘Well, it's waiting just outside, actually.’

‘You got a new car?’ Fred and George said together, sounding thrilled.

‘Uh, no,’ said Mr. Weasley. Mrs. Weasley had crossed to the entrance doors for the Great Hall and disappeared around the corner.

‘What is it, then?’ Ron persisted. Mr. Weasley coughed uncomfortably and turned to face the doors.

‘Come along, dear,’ Mrs. Weasley said, backing into the Great Hall and beckoning to someone behind her.

‘Mum--’ Ron began.

But Mrs. Weasley backed away and revealed the person who had come in behind her. It was Percy.

For a very long moment nobody said a word, but everyone stared at Percy.

‘What is HE doing here?’ Fred demanded suddenly, in a sharp voice.

‘Fred!’ Mrs. Weasley snapped angrily.

‘Now, Fred, Molly,’ said Mr. Weasley, in a stern voice Ron had never heard his father use before. ‘Everyone. Percy came to visit us yesterday evening, just after we got back from seeing Charlie. We had a very long talk, and he's apologized to Molly and me, and we've accepted that apology. He knows he was mistaken.’

Percy's eyes darted around the room but he did not look at his brothers. Ron felt a sudden burst of anger bubble up inside him. Fred and George both started to speak but Ron beat them to it.

‘Mistaken?’ Ron said sarcastically. ‘Is that it? How about bloody stupid, eh? How about selfish? You worked for Fudge while Fudge was telling *The Daily Prophet* to print lies about Harry and Professor Dumbledore. You...you slammed the door in Mum's face and sent back your jumper without a note. Dad almost got killed by a snake and my ‘crazy, unbalanced’ best mate here is the only reason's he's alive and you didn't even come visit Dad when he was in hospital. We all almost got killed at the end of term last year when VOLDEMORT showed up at the Ministry of Magic. Harry, me, Hermione. I was in hospital for days, and you didn't visit, you didn't write. Bugger your mistake!’

‘RON!’ Mrs. Weasley yelled, scandalized.

'It's all right, Mother,' said Percy. His voice was scratchy, and it was only then that Ron noticed how thin Percy had become. He had dark shadows under his eyes and was very pale, his hair unkempt and his clothes hanging on his skinny frame. 'I'm quite sure I deserved that, along with anything else the rest of you wish to say.'

Ron, Fred and George all opened their mouths to speak again, but stopped as one. There was something in Percy's voice that caught Ron off guard. Where was the arrogance, the ambitious determination, the lofty confidence that Percy was right about everything? The voice Percy used now was defeated and broken.

'I have no defence for my behavior of the past 18 months,' Percy went on, still looking at the floor. 'There's no excuse whatsoever. I simply wanted to be able to apologize in person to you all. And you, Harry. I don't expect forgiveness, now or ever. And if you would prefer I leave, I'll go.'

'No, Percy!' Mrs. Weasley cried, her eyes filling with tears.

Ron swallowed and looked at Fred, George and Bill, then at Harry. In truth he could not forgive Percy, at least not yet. It wasn't just Percy's actions of the past year and a half, it was everything. For Ron's entire life Percy had acted as though he were superior to everyone, as though his own family wasn't good enough because they were poor. Fred, George and Bill did not look too ready to forgive Percy either, but they all nodded to one another in understanding. Whatever Percy's sins, they would not spoil their mother's happiness at having her son back.

'Percy doesn't have to leave,' Bill said. 'It'll take us some time, understand, for him and for us to fix what's messed up, but...I think we can all put aside our own personal stuff for the holiday, and be a family, can't we?'

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The holiday could not end fast enough for Ron. The weather had turned ugly overnight, the castle so cold that he took to wearing two jumpers, several pairs of the ugly socks Dobby had given him, and his school robes, which he never normally wore except to class or meals. The tension among the Weasleys now that Percy was back was almost unbearable. Ron could not help, however, but admire Fred and George--both of whom had never liked Percy much, even before the family's fall-out with him--who maintained a kind of cool politeness toward their older brother. It was hardly friendly, but just civil enough to avoid any unpleasant confrontations. Percy, for his part, took to staying close to their parents, who were the only ones genuinely thrilled at his return.

Then, of course, was Snape's return. Their greasy-haired Potions master looked somewhat the worse for wear from his six weeks away; he was thinner and paler (which was saying something, considering his normal skin-tone resembled something close to chalk) and looked alternately disgruntled and unnerved about something. He seemed to disappear again after the dinner the night Percy showed up, but McGonagall informed them, when they had inquired about Snape's latest mission, that he was shut up in his office attending to his duties for the Order of the Phoenix and preparing his lessons for the following term. She also told them in snippy tones to

stop prying into other people's business. Harry and Ron were therefore left to speculate on what Snape had done and what information he had obtained about Voldemort's doings. As Harry had not had any visions and his scar was not hurting him beyond the usual daily prickling, he and Ron eventually gave up trying to figure out what Snape was up to and instead began to dread having to go back to Potions lessons at all.

Ron busied himself with studying--something he never did on holiday--for lack of much else to do. The weather was simply too cold and snowy for Quidditch games. Hermione had not left forwarding instructions for her copies of *The Daily Prophet*, so Ron and Harry took them and read them instead, every morning at breakfast. So far nothing alarming had happened. It was making them both distinctly uneasy. What had happened to those three scientists who had gone missing, not to mention those viruses that had been stolen from those labs? And Ron still hadn't figured out what role Wormtail was playing in all this. Harry reminded Ron that everyone was under the impression that Wormtail had died sixteen years ago, so Wormtail would be keeping a low profile and would not be likely to show up in the newspaper.

Hermione wrote to Ron every day and sent him several postcards with photographs--the non-moving Muggle kind--of various places in New Zealand she was visiting. He endured a day's worth of ribbing from Fred and George when she sent him a photograph of herself standing on a beach wearing the black bikini she'd worn last summer, her hair entirely wild and unkempt, and had written on the back 'I miss you, can't wait to see you! Love, 'Mione.' But Ron was too busy gawking at the photo itself, noticing how tan Hermione was and how she really did have nice legs and how he was so glad her hair was bushy again, to notice much teasing from his brothers.

Ron had even taken to being nice to Crookshanks, if only because he was Hermione's cat. Crookshanks immediately insinuated himself into Ron's routine by leaping up onto Ron's lap whenever Ron was trying to study and, worse, curling up on Ron's bed at night to go to sleep. Ron didn't much like having the cat taking up space on his bed, but he resisted his many urges to kick Crookshanks all the same.

Ron wrote Hermione every day but most of his letters were decidedly mundane. He told her about Percy's visit, but that seemed to be the only bit of news to relate to her. Nothing was happening with Voldemort, and the holiday was really rather boring this year. He tried a few times to write a poem to her but gave up in disgust. Everything he wrote was clumsy and sounded ridiculous when he read it out loud. He only stopped attempting the poetry when he realized he was going through parchment at an alarming rate and wouldn't be able to replenish his supply for lack of funds.

The only thing that made Ron nervous about Hermione's return was that things were still unsettled between them. Ron still felt a bit embarrassed by the way he had blurted out all those things to Hermione after they'd kissed that first time. He reminded himself that his brain had been rather jumbled at the moment, but even so, it was hardly the eloquent type of speech he'd hoped for. And Hermione had not told him she loved him back, had she? True, there had hardly been any time for her to do so, but Ron couldn't help feeling a sliver of doubt about the way things would be between them. When she came back, would she automatically assume she was his girlfriend? Would she want him to ask her to be his girlfriend? Or maybe he wasn't supposed to

do that because it would be rushing things. He knew he should take her on a proper date, but then again, they were best mates already. Dates might be romantic but they were also usually the type of thing for two people to get to know one another better. Ron and Hermione already knew one another very well. Why did they really need to date at all?

Ron was so confused by all this that he cornered Bill again on the morning of New Year's Eve.

‘So, what do you think?’ Ron asked, after explaining everything to Bill in a rush.

‘Well, you do have to take her on at least a few dates,’ said Bill. ‘You can't expect your relationship to be the same as it was but with snogging rights.’

‘Why not?’ Ron asked, thinking that sounded quite acceptable to him.

‘Because,’ Bill said, ‘Hermione needs to know that you love her and appreciate her.’

‘But I told her I did already!’ Ron protested.

‘Talk is cheap,’ Bill said. ‘You've got to show her, too. And not just by taking her out on dates, mind. It's the little things that really count, and actions always speak louder than words.’

‘Well, I can't afford to...I mean, I don't have all this money to throw around...’

‘It's not about buying her stuff,’ Bill said. ‘It's about not taking her for granted. About treating her with respect. You don't have to act all hen-pecked, you don't have to agree with her all the time and you don't have to change who you are, but you have to respect her as a person. You have to show her that you don't look down on things that are important to her, even if you think they're a bit cracked.’

‘You mean like *spew*?’ Ron said, slightly alarmed. ‘Her obsession with elf rights?’

‘Exactly,’ said Bill. ‘You might think she's wasting her time or being silly about something like that, but it matters to her and you shouldn't disparage the things that matter to her. I guarantee you that you have obsessions she probably thinks are silly, and she'll have to learn to respect those things, too. Like your obsession with Quidditch.’

‘Right,’ said Ron. ‘I think I get it. But...what do you mean by little things? What sort of little things do you do for Fleur? You know, to show her...you appreciate her or whatever?’

Bill considered for a moment, then went on. ‘All right, then. Say, if Fleur cooked me dinner, I'd wash the dishes, without her asking me to wash the dishes. If she had to go out of town for some reason, I'd offer to look after her cat, again, without her having to ask me to do it. I might pick her up a flower on the way home from work, just out of the blue, not because it's Valentine's Day. If I spend the night at her place and I have to leave early to go into work, I'll leave a note on her pillow telling her

something nice.'

'You've spent the night with her?' Ron asked, with something like awe in his voice.

Bill rolled his eyes. 'Yeah. I've spent the night with her. A lot.'

'Right,' said Ron hastily, looking down. 'So, it sounds like I have to be a mind reader here.'

'No,' said Bill. 'It just means you have to start thinking about her feelings first instead of your own. It's not all that hard, you know, and it's actually fun and feels pretty good.' He paused. 'And by the way, a girl is usually more...affectionate when she knows her man is treating her right.'

Ron blushed. 'So, uh, if...if I'm all nice to Hermione and do little stuff, she'll...she'll...'

'Be more inclined to kiss you, yeah,' Bill said. 'Among other things.'

'Other things. Right,' Ron said in a strangled voice--he hadn't even considered other things before but now all kinds of other things were swirling around in his brain.

'But you shouldn't be treating her nicely because you expect anything in return,' Bill warned. 'Girls can spot that a mile away. You have to be good to her because you want to be, because you want her to be happy, not because you hope she'll do the physical stuff in exchange. Do you get what I'm saying?'

Ron blinked, trying to absorb all of Bill's advice. 'Yeah. I think so. Be nice to her because...because you want to be, because it makes her happy. Don't take her for granted. Respect, and uh, talk is cheap, and don't be nice to her just because you want to...do...physical stuff.'

'Very good,' Bill said, smiling broadly and clapping Ron on the back.

'Congratulations, little bro. You're practically a man. Now all you need to do is start shaving.'

'Shut up.'

## *Chapter Fifteen: Harry's Vision*

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Percy, Fred and George all left Hogwarts on New Year's Day. The sun finally came out and Harry and Ron took advantage of it with a fly on their brooms and some easy Quidditch practice, then spent the rest of the afternoon taking down the hundreds of gaudy decorations Dobby had strewn there for the New Year's holiday.

'I swear, Dobby needs to get out more,' Ron said dryly, tossing another banner that read HAPPEE NOO YEER into the fire. 'I'm starting to think Hermione might have a point about *spew*.'

The students began to return to school that evening. With the common room clean, his studies up to date, and his morning fly on his broom out of the way, Ron had nothing to occupy his mind until Hermione got back that night. As such he was very nervous. He tried to take a long walk through the castle to clear his head, not really paying attention to where he was headed, but then he passed by the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy--who was getting conked on the head by several mean looking mountain trolls--and he remembered that the Room of Requirement was just behind it and that it was a popular place for couples to go to snog.

Among other things, he thought, half-terrified. The room had been sealed shut but somehow Ron doubted the lack of access to that particular room would stand in the way of couples determined to do...other things. He wondered if he and Hermione would eventually--

But then he bit his lip and tried to think about something else, because thinking about THAT made things a bit uncomfortable for him in particular body parts.

Ginny arrived back with Dean at dinner time, full of stories about everything having to do with Muggles. Ron only half-listened to her chatter and tried to eat something, but his stomach was in knots.

'What's wrong with you?' said Harry in a low voice.

'Nothing,' said Ron. He couldn't bring himself to eat much.

'You're nervous about Hermione, aren't you?' said Harry.

‘No,’ Ron lied.

Harry appraised him coolly, clearly not believing him, but went back to his meal all the same.

Five minutes later as Harry finished his second helping of pudding and Ron continued to stare at his plate, a voice floated over them.

‘Hi, Harry.’

Harry whirled around, nearly spilling his pumpkin juice, and looked up.

‘Hi, Susan,’ he said, his face lighting up with a smile.

‘Uh, do you want to--’ Susan began.

‘Yeah,’ said Harry at once, taking her hand and standing up. He left the Great Hall hand in hand with Susan without so much as a backward glance at Ron. Ron hoped they were careful; McGonagall was still on a tear about ‘fraternizing’ students.

‘They’re getting serious,’ said Ginny, taking a bite of apple tart.

‘Looks that way,’ said Ron stiffly. He was too nervous to think about Harry right now.

‘She seems good for him,’ said Ginny dispassionately. ‘He seems happy, or at least not so upset all the time.’

‘Yeah,’ said Ron.

‘Are you okay, Ron?’ said Ginny.

‘Fine,’ said Ron.

‘Did you ever talk to Hermione?’ said Ginny.

‘Yeah,’ said Ron. ‘We, uh, talked.’

‘You told her?’

‘Yeah,’ said Ron, his ears now beet red, his neck burning.

‘How’d it go?’ Ginny asked.

‘Good,’ said Ron. ‘Uh, well, I mean.’ He stared resolutely at his uneaten pudding.

‘Oh,’ said Ginny, and Ron could feel, if not see, her smile. ‘Well, congratulations. It’s about time.’

‘Uh, thanks,’ said Ron, and he realized he couldn’t stand to sit down in the Great Hall another minute. He got up and headed to Gryffindor Tower.

Hermione arrived sometime after dinner. Ron was in the common room, pretending to read his *History of Magic* textbook. Seamus and Lavender were sitting on the sofa near the fire, flipping through a photo album. Colin Creevey and Ginny had taken a table in a far corner and were studying their Charms notes. Harry was still not back from his walk, or whatever it was, with Susan. Ron kept checking his watch every fifteen seconds, then looked down at his book and noticed he’d read the same line at least twenty times without it sinking in, when he heard a distinctive creak and looked

up.

Hermione clambered through the portrait hole, dragging her trunk behind her.

Ron leapt up, his *History of Magic* book falling to the floor with a thud. He ignored it and hurried over to her.

‘Hi, Hermione!’ he said, his voice a bit too loud. Seamus and Lavender turned around. ‘Uh,’ Ron went on. ‘I’ll get the trunk for you.’

‘Thanks,’ said Hermione, smiling shyly. ‘But, um, Ron, you can’t really...carry it up to my room, you know.’

‘Oh, right!’ Ron said, remembering that boys couldn’t enter the girls’ dormitories. ‘Uh, I forgot about that.’

‘It’s okay, I’ll just levitate it upstairs,’ she said.

They stood still for a long moment, just looking at each other. Hermione’s hair was curlier but still looked very springy and soft and she was very tan. He really wanted to touch her hair. Well, he really wanted to touch HER, but instead he kept his hands at his sides, fists clenched.

‘You...you look nice,’ he said, wishing immediately that he’d thought to tell her she looked radiant or beautiful or anything more impressive than ‘nice.’ He heard Seamus and Lavender snigger and shot them a dirty look; they turned around and went back to their photo album.

‘Thanks,’ said Hermione. ‘So, how...how was your holiday?’

‘Oh, yeah,’ said Ron. ‘It was good. Thanks for the Ptolemy card, it was excellent. I really liked it. I mean, I told you that in my letters, but, you know thanks. And for the book as well.’

She smiled and drew him into a very tight hug. Ron hugged her back, breathing in the scent of her hair, which smelled a little different. Like lilacs and something tropical. Citrus, perhaps.

She kissed him on the cheek and pulled back, looking very shy. Ron was nearly overcome with the urge to kiss her on the lips right then, but he held back, not sure she’d appreciate that with the common room being so crowded.

‘Have you seen Crookshanks?’ she asked.

‘Oh, uh,’ said Ron. ‘Actually, yeah, he’s up in my room at the moment, sleeping. He’s decided he likes the foot of my bed.’

‘You’re letting him sleep on your bed?’ Hermione asked shocked.

‘Yeah, well, you know,’ said Ron. ‘He seems to like me now, I guess. He’s not so bad,

really.'

'That's very sweet of you,' she said, smiling, and she hugged him again and kissed him on the cheek, except that he turned slightly and she caught the corner of his mouth.

'Oh,' said Hermione, blushing, as she pulled away.

'It's okay,' said Ron. 'My fault.' Not that he minded. No, he didn't mind at all.

Then he suddenly remembered Bill's advice about 'little things'; apparently, being nice to Crookshanks must be a 'little thing' that made Hermione happy. Ron resolved never to have an unkind thought about Crookshanks again.

'Well, I'll just put this away,' said Hermione when she stepped back from Ron. She looked at Ron expectantly.

'Oh!' he said suddenly, something clicking in his brain. 'Uh, shall we...go for a walk, or something? You know, after you've stowed your trunk?'

'That would be lovely,' she said, beaming at him. She pointed her wand at her trunk, saying '*Locomotor* trunk,' and followed it up the staircase to the girls' dormitory. Ron watched her go, feeling absurdly happy that she was back, even if his stomach was flopping around like a dying fish again.

He returned to his chair and stacked up his books, ignoring the renewed giggling by Lavender and Seamus, and met Hermione at the foot of the girls' staircase when she reappeared.

'Shall we go, then?' he asked.

'All right,' she said. Ron took her by the hand and she smiled up at him. He noticed then how small her hand was compared to his. Hers was soft, but for her index finger and thumb, which were a bit callused from holding a quill so much. It was nice, holding her hand like that. They left the common room, not noticing that everyone else was staring at them.

They walked for well over an hour. Ron was very nervous at first, because he just wasn't sure he'd be able to talk to her as he had before he'd confessed everything to her and they'd kissed on the boys' staircase. It was indeed awkward for a few minutes, but pretty soon they were chatting about everything and nothing, and Ron suddenly

realized that, even better, they were *talking*. Without having a row. They simple talked like best friends who happened to be holding hands.

‘Ron,’ said Hermione slowly.

‘Yeah?’ said Ron.

‘I...missed you,’ said Hermione, blushing a bit. ‘Over the holiday.’

Ron blushed as well, and the nervous flutterings in his stomach started up again. ‘Me, too. I mean, I missed you, too.’

‘You know how last year, I came home from holiday early?’ she said. ‘Well, not home, but to the headquarters?’

‘Yeah,’ said Ron. ‘Because Harry was--’

‘It wasn’t just...to be with Harry,’ said Hermione, not looking at him. ‘I...well, I rather wanted to be with you, too.’

This news made Ron feel inordinately happy, and he grinned.

‘I’m glad you came back early,’ he said.

‘I really liked that perfume you gave me,’ she said.

‘Oh,’ said Ron, remembering that she’d gotten him a homework planner, which he *hadn’t* liked much. But he wasn’t about to tell her that. ‘Uh, I liked your gift, too.’

‘No, you didn’t,’ said Hermione. She stopped walking and let go of his hand.

‘Yeah, I did,’ he insisted.

‘Ron,’ said Hermione, in that tone of hers that told him she didn’t believe him at all. ‘It’s okay. I wanted to get you something else but...well, I didn’t know what to get at all. It’s hard to shop for boys and...’

‘The homework planner really wasn’t so bad,’ said Ron. ‘Honest. I used it during O.W.Ls.’

‘You did?’

‘Yeah,’ he said, ‘although I did put a Silencing Charm on it.’

She giggled. He usually didn’t like it much when girls giggled, but it wasn’t so bad when Hermione did it. Maybe because she didn’t do it very often, or maybe because he was the one who’d made her giggle.

He took her hand in his again.

They walked in silence for a few minutes, and Ron realized that this was okay, too.

All too soon it was time to head back to the common room. They walked deliberately slowly, not really anxious to get back too soon, when they reached the Transfiguration classroom.

Ron started to move past it, clutching Hermione’s hand in his, when she suddenly tugged him through the open door and into the darkened classroom.

‘Hermione, what--’ he started to ask her, but he was cut off when she flung her arms

around him, pulled his head down and kissed him.

Ron staggered, completely taken off guard by her...assertiveness. But soon enough he had his arms around her and he was stroking her hair and he was tingling all over and remembering just what her mouth felt and tasted like.

She pulled away and he felt like he might fall down.

‘Wow,’ he said, his knees very weak.

‘Sorry,’ said Hermione quickly.

‘What for?’ said Ron. ‘That was really good.’ He smiled what he knew had to be a very goofy grin.

She laughed shyly and looked down at her shoes. He took her hands in his and tugged her just a little closer.

‘Is this...weird?’ she said softly, finally looking up at him.

‘Is what weird?’ said Ron. He was still a bit dizzy from the kiss.

‘You know,’ said Hermione. ‘I mean, you and me...you know.’

‘I don’t think it’s weird,’ said Ron. ‘Different but not...weird. Do...do you think it’s weird?’

‘No,’ she said, without hesitating. She looked at him and smiled, then looked away, shy again.

He was still holding her hands in his.

‘Your hands,’ he said. ‘They’re really small.’

‘Oh,’ said Hermione. ‘Maybe your hands are just...really big.’

‘Right,’ said Ron. ‘That’s me. Big clown hands and big clown feet.’

‘I didn’t mean it like that,’ said Hermione quickly. She looked down and turned his hands so that his palms faced the ceiling, and she studied them for a moment. He swallowed. There was something about this gesture that struck him; he felt tingles spreading all over him even as he felt ashamed of his large, clumsy hands, that were freckled on top and callused beneath from playing Quidditch.

‘I think they’re very nice,’ said Hermione shyly. She looked up at him and smiled. He smiled weakly back, his mind spinning. Nobody had ever told him he had nice hands. Nobody had ever told him he had nice anything, really. He wasn’t handsome like Bill or good-natured like Charlie or smart like Percy or funny like Fred and George. He wore hand-me-downs and he scraped decent grades in school because the girl holding his hands right now helped him with his homework all the time. He was Harry Potter’s Best Friend. He was nothing special. He was Just Ron.

Except that now he was alone in a dark classroom with a girl he’d fancied for the better part of forever and she was looking at him with wet lips and she’d just told him he had nice hands, and suddenly he felt like a whole lot more than Just Ron. He also felt a whole lot of things going on with his body and he was very, very glad at that moment that he had school robes on.

‘Yeah?’ he said, in part because he wouldn’t mind if she said that again, and in part because his head was spinning too much for him to say anything else.

She only nodded, though, and moved closer to him and released his hands. His nice big hands. He clenched his fists, not quite sure where to put them. His eyes moved

down, then up over Hermione and he suddenly had a very good idea of where he *wanted* to put his hands, but he stopped himself. She'd slap him for sure.

Instead he felt himself put his hands on her waist--that was really small, too, he noticed--and he tugged her closer to him again and he heard himself say 'C'mere' and he felt his head drop and felt her breath as she lifted her head and then they were kissing again.

Somewhere in the small part of Ron's brain that was still functioning properly, he thought perhaps they should be heading back to the common room. That maybe kissing in a classroom was not such a good idea. That there was a chance they could get caught.

The rest of him, however, was focused on what was happening with his lips, her lips, her hands, his hands. Hers were on the back of his neck. His ran up her back and pushed into her hair. Merlin, but it was so soft and wonderful. Her lips were soft, too, and her mouth tasted like chocolate, and then he felt her mouth open against his and felt her tongue, and he moved his against hers, and it was amazing, and his hands went from her hair to her back, and then his arms went round her waist and she pressed up against him. Things were happening to him down below as they kissed on and on. He was dizzy again and he began to consider that he might pass out if they stopped. Except that he never wanted to stop...

'Mr. Weasley! Miss Granger!'

They broke apart and found themselves looking at the very furious and thin-lipped Professor McGonagall.

'Oh dear,' murmured Hermione.

Ron gulped and looked at Professor McGonagall, who was white in the face. He, on the other hand, was so red in the face he was quite sure he resembled a giant tomato. He was grateful that he had on a heavy jumper that hid the evidence of certain things. And then the thought of McGonagall noticing such a thing caused that little problem to go away quite instantly.

‘Uh...hi, Professor,’ he stammered, and like an idiot, he waved at her.

‘This is a CLASSROOM, not Lover’s Lane!’ she snapped, marching over to them and looking supremely regal and supremely put out. She was shorter than Ron but in that moment she seemed to tower over him.

‘I am shocked! Such behaviour in two prefects! After I specifically warned students about this very thing. I am extremely disappointed, especially in you, Miss Granger. I expected better judgment from you. Both of you receive detentions, and five points from each of you! Now get back to the common room immediately. And if I catch either of you engaging in inappropriate behaviour again, you’ll get a lot worse!’

‘Yes, Professor,’ they both mumbled. They left the Transfiguration classroom with McGonagall right behind them. For a moment Ron thought she might follow them all the way back to the common room, but instead McGonagall turned around and headed in the direction of the staff room. Ron wondered why she was leaving him and Hermione alone after the way she’d just screeched at them, but then he realized that Hermione was practically running to the fat lady’s portrait, and he started to jog to keep up with her.

‘Fainting Fancies,’ she said in a strangled sort of voice, and she and Ron crawled quickly through the portrait hole.

Hermione went into the common room first and raced over to the fireplace, where she collapsed against the mantle, her head in her hands, her shoulders shaking. Ron gulped at the sight of her sobbing. It would be awful for her, when she took being a prefect so seriously, to have received a detention. He felt absurdly guilty, even if it had been she who had pulled him into the Transfiguration classroom in the first place.

‘Hermione, I’m really sorry about this,’ he said regretfully, closing the distance between them and putting a hand on her shoulder. ‘Please, ‘Mione, don’t cry.’

Hermione turned to him, but to Ron’s shock, she wasn’t crying. She was laughing hysterically.

‘What’s...what’s so funny?’ he asked, amazed.

‘I...I got a de-detention!’ she gasped, laughing so hard that she was clutching at a stitch in her side. ‘I got a detention!’

‘And that’s funny?’ said Ron, bewildered. What had gotten into her?

‘It’s hi-hilarious!’ she croaked, wiping at her streaming eyes. ‘We’re p-prefects!’

‘Uh, yeah, I know,’ said Ron, starting to get a bit worried about her, because she was acting a bit mad. Entirely un-Hermione. Regular Hermione would indeed be sobbing

or stomping round in a temper about getting a detention.

‘And we-we got d-detention for “fraternizing” in a classroom!’ she said, howling with laughter. ‘That’s brilliant!’

‘It’s not brilliant, it stinks!’ Ron protested. ‘This isn’t funny! We got busted by McGonagall for...for snogging in a classroom and we got detention. AND we lost points!’

‘Oh, Ron,’ said Hermione, calming down at once and smiling up at him. ‘You really need to lighten up.’

‘I need to lighten up?’ said Ron, incredulous. ‘Me? You’re actually telling ME I need to--’

But his voice broke off as he watched her laughing, and suddenly he found the whole thing hilarious, too, and he broke into laughter with her.

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The following evening Ron and Hermione served their detentions, separately; McGonagall clearly didn’t trust the two of them in a room together. Hermione was made to write lines (‘I will not engage in fraternizing with a boy in classrooms’).

Ron was sent to the trophy room again, to polish the silver, Muggle-fashion, under the watchful, grumpy eye of Filch. It went far better this time around, as Ron wasn’t belching up slugs.

He entered the common room at around midnight, exhausted, to find Hermione sitting at a table in the corner, her head resting on an open book. She was fast asleep. All around her were books, more than she usually had, which was saying something. Books spread out on the table, on the floor, stacked up in the other chairs. He crept over to her table and knelt down next to her. Her hair was in her face. He brushed it back and on impulse he caressed her cheek with his thumb. Then he gave her arm a gentle shake.

‘Mione,’ he whispered. ‘Wake up.’

Her eyes fluttered open and she sat up groggily. ‘What? Oh! Ron!’ She smiled at him

sleepily.

‘Hey,’ he said. ‘What are you doing? Term doesn’t start until tomorrow. Don’t tell me you still have homework left.’

‘No,’ said Hermione, yawning and stretching. ‘I was just doing some research. You know, about viruses. See?’ She indicated the book where her head had rested a moment ago. It was clearly a Muggle book, because the photos inside didn’t move. One photo showed a picture of a horribly ill man lying half-dead on a crude stretcher inside what looked like little better than a tent. The man’s face was sickly yellow and blood was bubbling from his nostrils. The other showed a picture of a red, translucent blob with several bizarre squiggles.

‘What’s that?’ said Ron, indicating the photo of the blob and trying not to look at the photo of the man on the stretcher.

‘It’s a blood sample,’ said Hermione, ‘shown under a microscope. It’s a magnifying glass that doctors use. The big blob is blood cell and those squiggles there, see? Those are strands of the Ebola virus.’

‘Lovely,’ said Ron, feeling slightly sick.

‘Unfortunately I wasn’t able to get much research done on holiday,’ said Hermione, standing up and stretching again. ‘It’s not easy to cart all these books around, but I’m really grateful Mum and Dad’s doctor friends are letting me use them. There’s nothing like this stuff here at Hogwarts.’

Just then the portrait hole opened and Harry climbed into the common room.

‘Hey,’ he said tiredly, then he noticed the dozens of books surrounding Hermione’s table. ‘What’s all this?’

‘Research,’ Ron answered. ‘Hermione’s got all these Muggle books on diseases.’

‘I’m trying to determine what virus Voldemort would use,’ she said. ‘But so far nothing I’ve seen makes too much sense. There just isn’t a virus that’s both powerful enough and fast enough for Voldemort to get what he wants--’

‘OW!’ Harry cried out suddenly. His hand flew to his scar. He dropped his bag of school books.

‘What?’ said Ron, rushing over to Harry and taking his arm to lead him to the sofa. ‘What’s up?’

‘It hurts,’ Harry groaned, sinking onto the couch. ‘Really...really bad. It hurts.’

‘Harry!’ Hermione cried, running over to him. ‘What can we do?’

‘Nothing,’ Harry said through gritted teeth. ‘Nothing. It...it has to pass...on its own--OW!’

His face had gone ashen. He was sweating. He looked ready to vomit.

Ron and Hermione looked at each other and then at Harry, feeling helpless.

‘Voldemort...’ Harry said slowly, panting. ‘He’s...a lot’s happening. He’s...he’s really emotional about something...he’s angry and he’s...he’s more determined. I think...the scientists!’

Harry sat up, his eyes wide, his hand still at his scar. ‘Those three scientists. Something’s happened to them. Something bad. Voldemort’s talking to someone...I can’t see who it is...’

Ron stared at Harry in fear and awe as Harry, lost in his vision, continued to speak.

‘Something about a book,’ Harry said. ‘He wants a book...he thinks it will help him gets what he wants...a book. He’s telling whoever he’s talking to...to get the book. To find the book...but he doesn’t know...the bloke Voldemort’s talking to swears he doesn’t know...OW! Oh, god, help me...no...’

‘Harry!’ Hermione cried. Ron grabbed Harry’s right hand and clutched it tightly, but Harry didn’t seem to notice.

Harry began to thrash around on the sofa and mutter words that Ron could not understand. Hissing, sinister words. He was speaking in Parseltongue. His scar was almost glowing red on his sweaty forehead.

‘Ron, what can we do?’ Hermione cried, looking at him. Ron shook his head. He didn’t know. He simply didn’t know. He felt utterly useless.

Harry’s whole body began to tremble, and his eyes were fluttering and his ashen face went white and he spoke in a voice that was not his own.

‘Get the book...get it...find it...it’s...it’s in Hogwarts...’ Harry’s eyes rolled into the back of his head, and he passed out.

Chapter Sixteen: Research

Ron raised the alarm almost the moment Harry slumped back onto the sofa. McGonagall came rushing into the common room in her tartan dressing gown and gasped aloud, then rushed off to inform Dumbledore.

‘Get him to the hospital wing, Mr. Weasley!’ she ordered.

Ron nodded and ran to the sofa. He and Hermione tried for a moment to wake Harry up, but he wouldn’t stir.

‘We’ll have to carry him,’ said Hermione.

‘I’ve got him,’ said Ron, scooping Harry up from the sofa. Harry was thoroughly limp, almost dead weight, and yet he still felt very light in Ron’s arms. He carried Harry carefully through the portrait hall and then he and Hermione rushed toward the hospital wing as fast as they could.

‘Madam Pomfrey!’ Hermione shrieked as they burst through the hospital wing doors.

‘What? What is it?’ Madam Pomfrey came hurtling through her office door and gasped. ‘Potter! What’s happened to him? Get him on the bed here, Weasley!’

‘He...he had an attack,’ said Ron, putting Harry down gently on the nearest bed. ‘He passed out.’

But Madam Pomfrey was already leaning over Harry, prodding him gently with her hands. She picked up his wrist and held it firmly between her fingers.

‘Well, he’s breathing and he’s got a pulse,’ she said. ‘But I don’t like his color, and his scar is very red. Was it...a vision?’

Ron and Hermione looked at each other, then back at Madam Pomfrey, and nodded.

The hospital doors flew open and Professor Dumbledore entered, his long dressing gown and silver hair flowing after him as he strode with remarkable quickness to Harry’s bedside. Behind him were Professors McGonagall and Snape.

‘What’s happened?’ Dumbledore asked, turning to Ron and Hermione.

Ron felt his mouth go dry. Harry had often talked very easily to the Headmaster, but Ron had always been intimidated by him, even though Dumbledore had never once been anything less than totally kindly toward him. He swallowed and looked at Hermione, and she took over.

‘Harry had a vision just now,’ she said. ‘In the common room. It was a very strong one and he passed out.’

‘Did he say what happened in the vision?’ Dumbledore asked in his steady voice. ‘Anything specific?’

‘Yes,’ said Hermione, her voice shaking just a little. ‘He mentioned those three Muggle scientists who went missing. He said something bad had happened to them. Then he said that Voldemort was angry, but...but determined about something. Voldemort was talking to someone, but Harry couldn’t see who it was.’

‘Did Harry say what Voldemort was talking about?’ Dumbledore said, but it was his eyes and not his voice that looked urgent.

‘Yes,’ Hermione went on. ‘He said...he said something about a book. He wanted whoever it was he was talking to, to find a book. And...and that the book was in Hogwarts.’

Dumbledore nodded, but said nothing, but McGonagall gasped, and Snape said, as though he hadn’t meant anyone else to hear it, ‘Dear god.’

Ron stared at Snape--the Potions master was so pale that Ron could see the thin blue veins in his face. Snape’s black eyes were bright and fearful--it was the first time Ron had ever seen Snape looked afraid.

‘Severus,’ Dumbledore said slowly. ‘Does this mean anything to you?’

Snape took a breath and nodded. ‘The Dark Lord...is searching for a means to rid the world of Muggles.’

‘I am aware of that,’ said Dumbledore. ‘You have already filled me in on that issue.’

‘Yes,’ said Snape slowly, ‘but...but Potter’s vision suggests that Voldemort has found a solution to his problem. A very potent solution.’ Snape seemed reluctant to want to elaborate, but just then Hermione piped in.

‘Please, sir,’ she said to Dumbledore. ‘I think I might know what Voldemort’s trying to do.’

‘Yes, Miss Granger?’

‘I...I think Voldemort is trying to find a way to make Muggles sick,’ she said. ‘I think he wants to use a deadly disease to wipe out the Muggle population. That’s why those laboratories were broken into, and why those scientists disappeared. He’s trying to develop some sort of super-virus that can kill lots of people. And...and I think this book, whatever it is, must contain the way to make the virus or distribute it. Some spell or potion, maybe.’

Dumbledore eyed Hermione impassively, then nodded. ‘Impressive, Miss Granger. It seems you have given this matter rather a lot of thought.’

‘Yes, sir,’ she said, blushing and looking down. ‘I’ve...I’ve been doing some research on Muggle diseases and epidemics, sir. I...I have several medical texts that I borrowed from some doctors my parents know, you see.’ Then she gasped. ‘But, oh no! What if...what if one of those books is the one Voldemort wants?’

‘Relax, Miss Granger,’ said Dumbledore, holding up a placatory hand. ‘I do not believe the book Voldemort is looking for is among the ones you’re using. He is seeking a magical means of spreading this sickness, and he clearly thinks there is a book in Hogwarts somewhere that will contain the spell he needs.’

He glanced significantly at McGonagall and then at Snape. Ron saw their exchanged looks and knew they were all thinking the same thing, but whatever it was, they did not intend to share it with him or Hermione at the moment.

‘I appreciate your diligence in this matter,’ Dumbledore went on, ‘but I must insist that if you wish to continue to investigate this, that you inform myself, Professor McGonagall or Professor Snape of your findings. It is vital that we are kept abreast of things. We must not have a repeat of the events of last term, do you understand? You are not to pursue this matter on your own. Voldemort’s plans are ambitious, and as such he will spare nothing to achieve them. You and Mr. Weasley and especially Harry are in very grave danger, to say nothing of the other students. I insist that you obey me in this.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Ron and Hermione both mumbled.

‘Severus, Minerva,’ Dumbledore said, ‘I think we need to go to my office and contact a few others who would find this information useful and be discreet about it.’

Snape and McGonagall both nodded and followed Dumbledore out of the hospital wing in a wave of robes.

Ron and Hermione looked at each other, then down at Harry, who gave a soft moan and stirred.

‘Harry!’ Hermione said, as they both started toward his bed.

‘Step back, you two,’ Madam Pomfrey ordered. ‘He’ll be fine, but he’s a bit feverish and I’d say he’s had enough visions for one night. I’m giving him a dreamless sleep draught. You two clear off, you can see him in the morning.’

Hermione started to say something but Ron grabbed her hand and gave it a squeeze to warn her not to argue the point. With one last mournful look at Harry, he and Hermione left the hospital wing, dreading what was in store for the next day.

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‘You were right, Harry, something did happen those scientists,’ said Hermione. ‘They’re dead.’

Ron and Hermione were sitting at the foot of Harry’s bed in the hospital wing, and she was reading aloud from *The Daily Prophet*. It was early in the morning and Harry was to be discharged in about an hour, after Madam Pomfrey had examined him one more time. He looked very tired, Ron thought, but he was listening intently to Hermione and his eyes were clear and focused.

‘It says here that the bodies of the three scientists were found outside a town called Little Hangleton, England,’ Hermione went on. ‘None of the bodies showed any outward sign of physical injuries and the Muggle authorities can’t explain the cause of death, but the Muggle police say that it is too early to make any judgments and that they must conduct a thorough forensic examination before any cause of death can be determined.’

‘Forensic examination?’ Ron asked, confused.

‘That’s where Muggle police and scientists investigate a scene of crime,’ Hermione explained. ‘They take all sorts of samples from the body and from the area around the body and analyze everything to find clues as to what happened, who committed the crime, that sort of thing.’

‘It was the Killing Curse,’ Harry said quietly. ‘It had to be. When Wormtail killed Cedric, there wasn’t a mark on him.’

‘I thought Voldemort killed Cedric,’ said Ron.

‘It was Wormtail,’ said Harry. ‘Voldemort just gave the order. He didn’t have his own body yet. Little Hangleton, though. That sounds familiar for some reason, but I can’t think of it.’

‘If it was the Killing Curse, the Muggles won’t be able to explain why three perfectly healthy men dropped dead,’ said Hermione. ‘Unless...’

‘Unless what?’ Harry asked.

‘Well, maybe those scientists were forced by Voldemort to work on developing the virus, but then they got sick from it themselves,’ Hermione said.

‘But the article says there wasn’t a mark on them,’ Ron pointed out. ‘I thought you said viruses did nasty things to your insides and made you bleed to death and stuff.’

‘Not all viruses do that,’ Hermione corrected. ‘But, yes, you and Harry are probably right. I’m no expert but I’ve never heard of a deadly virus that didn’t leave SOME kind of outward signs. Any trained medical examiner would almost certainly be able to spot some outward symptom of a deadly disease on a corpse. I guess the scientists stopped being useful to Voldemort.’

‘The article goes on to say that thus far Muggle public health officials have seen no reported cases of anthrax poisoning or Ebola infection. There’ve been several cases of viral pneumonia, one fatal, but all of them happened to very old people and being that it’s the season for flu and pneumonia and that old people are more vulnerable to that stuff, they’re not placing the blame of the missing samples from the labs,’ Hermione said.

There was a silence as the three of them absorbed this latest news. Harry groaned out loud and ran his hand through his messy hair.

‘Bill’s right,’ he said.

‘Right about what?’ Ron asked.

‘I need to learn Legilimency,’ said Harry. ‘I’ve got to be able to get inside Voldemort’s head by my own will. I can’t rely on visions coming to me out of the blue.’

‘But, Harry,’ said Hermione, sounding nervous. ‘That’s so dangerous. What if Voldemort realizes what you’re up to?’

‘I don’t think he would,’ said Harry. ‘I’m really good at Occlumency now, at least when I’m focused on it. Bill hasn’t been able to get inside my head for weeks now.’

‘Bill isn’t Voldemort,’ Ron noted. ‘He’s not trying to kill you.’

‘Yeah, but if I don’t start going after Voldemort he’s just going to keep showing up in my head when I’m distracted and making my stupid scar hurt and whatever visions I get will be incomplete,’ said Harry sharply. ‘You don’t know what it’s like, okay? One minute I’m going along just fine and the next minute he’s in there and everything hurts and I pass out. At least if I learn Legilimency I’ll have some control over things. I’ll be able to choose when I want to see what he’s up to.’

Hermione and Ron looked at each other, then at Harry, and nodded.

‘Just be careful,’ Hermione said gently. ‘Promise us you’ll be careful.’

Harry took a deep breath, as though trying not to snap at her, but then he nodded and said, ‘I promise. I’ll have Bill help me, all right? He’s really good at this stuff, he won’t let me do more than I’m ready to do.’

‘All right, you two!’ a sharp voice said. Madam Pomfrey swept over to them, carrying a bottle of Dr. Malatesta’s Migraine Mender and Headache Healer. ‘I need to look over my patient. Off with you! You’ll see him at breakfast.’

‘See you soon, mate,’ said Ron, clapping Harry on the shoulder, and he and Hermione left the hospital wing.

Harry did indeed rejoin them at breakfast, looking far better than he had just a short while earlier. Ron was pleased to see that despite the toll Harry’s vision had taken on him, he managed nonetheless to eat a hearty breakfast.

The next few weeks were so cold that students took to layering and wearing mittens and hats inside the castle between lessons. Hermione was spending every spare moment looking through her medical texts; Harry had called off Quidditch practices due to the cold, but Ron was kept plenty busy with his own schoolwork and prefect duties.

On top of this Ron found no time to be alone with Hermione. This was partly her doing; she seemed determined not to break any rules after serving her detention. She purposefully avoided taking walks with him after dinner and went to bed early at night, each time giving Ron a quick peck on the cheek and a warm look, but nothing else.

Ron wanted to be understanding. He knew they were all trying to stay ahead of Voldemort's plans. He knew how important all of it was. But then he would see Harry and Susan walking off somewhere together and he would remember that he hadn't kissed Hermione in days and he would feel jealous. If Harry could tear himself away from the business of school work and fighting dark wizards to spend time with his girlfriend, why couldn't Hermione do the same for Ron?

Things became very frustrating for Ron after two weeks without 'alone time' with Hermione. They were sitting in the common room on the floor, diagonal to one another, books on the coffee table. Ron was attempting to finish his Potions essay, on the properties of belladonna, but his eyes kept straying back to Hermione. Her hair was curling like a halo around her face and she was reading with intense concentration. The tip of her tongue was touching her top lip and she kept trying to tuck her hair behind her ears, to no effect. The whole spectacle was driving Ron to distraction.

Focus, Weasley, he thought, turning back to his Potions essay; he'd manage to write about three lines in the past half hour. He saw movement in the corner of his eye and noticed that Hermione was tucking her hair behind her ears again. Then she bit her lip. That did it. Ron's self control snapped.

He put down his quill, leaned over to her and kissed her on the mouth.

'Ron!' Hermione protested, pushing him away. 'Honestly.'

'Oh, come on, 'Mione,' said Ron. 'You've been at this non-stop. I've hardly seen you at all. Can't you take a little break?'

'No,' Hermione hissed, her eyes not moving from the page. 'For one thing, we could get caught again, and I can't afford any more detentions if I'm going to get the time I need to figure out what Voldemort's up to.'

'You can't spare ten minutes for me?' Ron asked, pouting a bit. He reached over and ran a hand through her hair gently. 'Come on, 'Mione. Please? Five minutes. That's the first time I've kissed you in two weeks, for Merlin's sake--'

'Ron!' she snapped, brushing his hand away impatiently. 'This is important stuff I'm doing here. Do you want to stop Voldemort from killing Muggles-- and Muggle borns, I might add--or don't you? Because if you're not going to help me leave me alone.'

'I only--' Ron began. She wasn't being fair. He'd been TRYING to help her, trying to stay on top of his own responsibilities as well. And doing a fair enough job of it, considering how frustrated he'd been.

Meanwhile Harry was off with Susan somewhere doing who knew what (though Ron had a fair idea). All Ron wanted was one good quick snog!

‘Honestly, Ron,’ she went on. ‘It’d be a fine thing, wouldn’t it, for me to crawl into a broom closet with you instead of figuring out what virus Voldemort’s trying to use. Do I really need to point out that if we don’t figure this out before he does, I won’t be around for you to snog because Voldemort and his cronies will have killed me and every other Muggle and Muggle-born around?’

Ron swallowed. She had a good point. Snogging would have to wait.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I’m really sorry, Hermione.’

There was a brief silence, in which Hermione only nodded to him and continued to read. Ron watched her as she sighed in exasperation as her hair fell in her eyes again and shoved it behind her ears. She was biting her lip again. He swallowed again, very hard.

‘You shouldn’t talk about that.’

‘About what?’ Hermione asked impatiently.

‘About you dying,’ he said, his voice feeling slightly strangled. ‘About you not...being around.’

Hermione looked at him and for a moment her eyes were sharp and Ron waited for her to rebuke him yet again. But then her eyes softened, and she smiled gently and reached up and placed a hand against his cheek.

Then she surprised him by leaning in and pressing her lips against his. Ron didn’t move for a moment; he wasn’t expecting her to kiss him and he was a bit nervous that if he kissed her back, he’d get...excited. But she moved her lips against his and he realized he really couldn’t *not* respond, and as the kiss deepened and her hands raked into his hair he went with it and bloody hell, he got excited and tingly all over. But then she broke the kiss and he was left with more than a bit of discomfort in certain areas and he wondered if maybe they should have kissed at all because now he REALLY wouldn’t get any work done.

‘I’m not going anywhere just yet,’ she said softly. ‘Now, did that help?’

‘Not really,’ said Ron, without thinking. But she giggled.

‘Boys,’ she said, shaking her head.

Ron shifted, trying to find a more comfortable sitting position, without having much success.

‘Can’t help it,’ he said, pouting again. ‘Now I’ll never get any work done.’

Hermione appraised him for a moment; then a little, mischievous smile came to her lips.

‘If you help me with this stuff we’ll get a lot more done and...and later we could, you know...do more of...what we just did,’ she said.

‘That’s a bribe,’ said Ron. A very good bribe, but a bribe all the same.

‘You don’t have to--’

‘Pass me a book,’ he said.

‘Boys,’ said Hermione again, handing him a heavy tome and smiling. He grinned at her, opened the book and began to read.

It took him a few minutes to focus his brain, but soon enough Ron was entirely concentrated on reading. It was confusing, difficult but ultimately fascinating material. He had never fully understood just how complex the human body was. Healers must have some understanding of this stuff, he thought, in order to be able to fix what was wrong with someone, but then, did wizards use machines like X- rays, which could see inside a person’s body and take pictures of bones and organs? He was pretty sure there were no such machines in the wizarding world. And lasers--incredible! Tiny lasers that could operate to fix a single broken vein. Scanners and microscopes that could detect infections in the blood. Vacuum machines that sucked out fat cells.

‘UGH!’ Ron said, his eyes resting on a photograph inside the book. ‘What the bloody hell is THAT?’

‘Hmm?’ Hermione looked over at Ron’s page. It showed two photos of a woman, or rather, the hips and legs of a woman. One photo featured a fat, dimpled set of hips and legs and the other featured a thinner but horribly scarred and bruised set of hips and legs.

‘Liposuction,’ said Hermione.

‘WHAT?’

‘Liposuction. It’s a procedure used to make a person look thinner,’ she said. ‘A cosmetic procedure. Rich people do it, it costs a ton of money.’

‘Rich Muggles PAY to look like that?’ Ron asked, flabbergasted.

‘Well, that’s a photo of the woman just a few days after the procedure,’ Hermione explained. ‘Presumably in about a month the bruises and scarring will lessen and she’ll look normal.’

‘That’s really disgusting,’ Ron said, turning the page.

‘It’s also completely irrelevant to what we’re trying to find,’ Hermione pointed out. ‘Look at the index, under epidemics.’

‘Right.’

Ron flipped to the back of the book, found ‘epidemics’ and flipped back to the appropriate pages.

‘Malaria,’ he read aloud. ‘West Nile virus. Yellow fever. Scarlet fever. Typhoid. In-flu-en-za. En--en--kepaletis. What?’

‘Encephalitis,’ Hermione said. ‘Sleeping sickness.’

‘Why can’t Muggles name their diseases with stuff we can pronounce?’ Ron grumbled.

‘Most of the virus names come from Latin or ancient Greek,’ Hermione explained.

‘Oh, of course,’ said Ron. Like that should be obvious, he thought sarcastically.

‘Ron,’ said Hermione, in that patient tone of hers she used when explaining something to him he didn’t fully understand, ‘a lot of our spells and charms ALSO come from Latin, you know.’

‘Oh.’

‘Hey,’ said a third voice.

They looked up and saw Harry, whose face was flushed and hair was sticking up more than usual. He had just returned from, no doubt, a vigorous snogging session with Susan. Ron smirked and went back to his book.

‘What are you doing?’ Harry asked, sitting down on the sofa next to Hermione.

‘Research,’ Ron said, trying to pronounce yet another ten syllable Muggle disease. ‘Want to join in?’

‘Uh, okay,’ said Harry.

‘Did you have a nice time with Susan?’ Hermione asked absently, as her eyes perused her own book.

‘Uh, yeah,’ said Harry, going red in the face.

Ron rolled his eyes. ‘I can’t believe you two haven’t been caught yet.’

‘We’re more careful than you two,’ said Harry smugly. Ron punched him in the arm.

‘Harry!’ said Hermione, looking up from her book and looking a bit scandalized. ‘Really.’

‘So,’ Harry said, in a tone of voice that indicated all discussions of snogging were over and picking up another heavy tome from the coffee table and opening it, ‘deadly epidemics, how lovely.’

‘Yes,’ said Hermione, sounding slightly impatient as she scanned over another page of her book.

‘Dammit!’ she said suddenly, slamming the book shut.

Ron and Harry both looked up from their own books. Hermione didn’t swear often.

‘What?’ they both asked.

‘It’s no good,’ she said. ‘None of the diseases in this book fits. They’re either too recent and have all sorts of treatments to counteract them or the symptoms are just too slow to start appearing.’

‘But can’t Voldemort just use magic to make it work faster?’

‘Yes,’ said Hermione, ‘but to do that he’s going to need an understanding of how the disease itself works, how to spread it AND how to come up with some kind of cure or antidote so that his own followers don’t get sick, remember? He’ll want a disease that’s easy to replicate, and then he’ll put together some antidote so he can inoculate himself and his cronies, and then he’ll spread the disease around somehow. And however it spreads, it needs to spread easily enough that a lot of people get it, but not so easily that EVERYONE gets it. Something really communicable without being airborne.’

‘Airborne,’ Ron repeated. ‘Like, it floats around in the air or something?’

‘Exactly,’ said Hermione.

Ron tried to absorb this but his brain was by now so completely exhausted reading about more diseases he couldn’t pronounce (like diphtheria, trichinosis and cholera) that he could barely keep his eyes open. He and Harry went through a few more diseases with Hermione, but to a one she dismissed all of them as not being the right one. Finally, the three of them gave up for the night. Ron shut his book and rubbed his eyes.

‘I’m turning in,’ Harry announced, standing and stretching. ‘You coming up, Ron?’

Ron started to say yes but then he looked at Hermione, who looked at him and then looked at the floor, then looked at him again. She was obviously trying to tell him something without saying anything out loud. Ron gave her an excused expression, and her eyes widened meaningfully and then she looked at the floor again. And suddenly he remembered. Hermione’s bribe. He suppressed a grin.

‘I’ll be up in a bit,’ he said, not looking at Harry.

‘Right,’ said Harry slowly. ‘Well, don’t let McGonagall catch you again. We don’t want to lose any more house points.’

‘Shut up,’ said Ron and Hermione together, looking at each other.

But Harry was already starting up the boys’ staircase, and Ron wasn’t paying attention to Harry anymore, anyway, because before he even heard the soft click of the door to the boys’ dormitory, indicating that Harry had gone inside, Ron was leaning over and pulling Hermione close and drawing her into a kiss.

‘Ron,’ she protested against his lips. But she had her arms around him all the same and she was smiling

‘Hey, you promised,’ said Ron, grinning and kissing her again.

She giggled, kissed him back for a moment and then pulled away.

‘Let’s, um, sit on the sofa,’ she suggested softly, and she stood up.

Oh, game ON, thought Ron, practically leaping up from the floor. He kissed her again and kept on kissing her as they sat down on the sofa, and the excitement he felt earlier was nothing to what he was feeling now.

They were kissing harder now and the room began to spin and Ron was dizzy and her mouth tasted really good and he heard a gasp when he felt himself falling over on the sofa. He didn’t know if she’d done it or he’d done it but now they were lying down and it was so much more comfortable than sitting up and Ron was tingling all over and his right arm was wrapped round her shoulders and his left hand was in her hair and then on her neck and then on her shoulder and he wondered if maybe he could get away with moving his left hand a little lower...no, he couldn’t do that, she grabbed his wrist and moved his hand back to her hair. Damn. Well, her hair was nice, anyway. But then she had to go and move a little bit and he felt pressure...somewhere and he just had to move his damn hand but maybe instead of where he wanted to put it he could put it on her waist. Yes, that was safe. He did, and she didn’t stop him, but she did keep kissing him and it was driving him crazy. That and her lilac smell, which came from her neck and he wondered what that part of her tasted like so he kissed her there and she sighed. Wow. Her waist was small and his hand slid a bit lower. When did she get that curvy thing going in her hip? He wondered if she had more soft girly curviness a bit lower and a bit further around...no, she wasn’t going for that either and she grabbed his wrist again.

‘Ron, wait,’ Hermione gasped. ‘Stop. We have to stop.’

‘Okay,’ said Ron, blinking. ‘Sorry.’ He stopped kissing her neck and she sat up and he lay there for a moment. It was so hot in the room now and he was breathing as though he’d just run up and down to the North Tower and back a dozen times. He closed his eyes and he wished the pressure down there would go away.

'It's okay,' said Hermione, and she sounded a bit out of breath, too. She was smoothing her hair down and smoothing her clothes and she wasn't looking at him, and she was blushing crimson.

'Are you...okay, Hermione?' Ron asked, finally able to sit up, sort of.

'I'm fine,' said Hermione. 'I just...it got a little...fast.'

'Right,' said Ron. 'Fast.'

'I mean, I just don't want to rush things,' she said, still not looking at him, but he kept looking at her.

'Right,' said Ron again. 'You're right.'

'I mean I've never, well, you know,' said Hermione.

'Well, I hope not!' said Ron indignantly.

'Ron.'

'Right, sorry,' he said quickly. 'I haven't...you know...either.'

'Oh,' said Hermione. 'Well, then...I just think...we should go slow.'

'Yeah,' said Ron.

'Are you okay?' she asked.

'Uh, yeah,' Ron lied.

'I mean, you don't mind if we take things slowly?' said Hermione, sounding nervous.

'I don't mind,' he lied. What else was he going to say? No, Hermione, I'm in a lot of pain right now and can we please shag right here on the sofa before I get brain damage?

Don't be a selfish prat, he thought to himself. She's your girlfriend and you, well, you love her, and she's the girl which means she's the one who gets to make decisions about...physical stuff and that's just the way it is.

'Are you sure you don't mind?' said Hermione.

'I'm sure,' he said, firmly.

'We should turn in,' said Hermione, standing up.

'Yeah,' said Ron, and he stood. She began to pick up her books and Ron helped her and he wished he could help her carry her books up to her room because that seemed

like the kind of gallant, boyfriend thing to do, but he couldn't. He'd already learned the hard way that boys couldn't go into the girls' dormitories.

'You sure you can carry all those?' said Ron, as Hermione took the rest of the books from him and balanced them in a huge stack in her arms.

'I'm sure,' she said. 'Well, good night Ron.'

'G'night,' he said, and he leaned toward her but then stopped. 'Uh, is it okay if...if I kiss you good night?'

'It's okay,' she said. 'But...just a quick one.'

'Right,' said Ron, and he kissed her quickly on the lips.

'Good night,' she said again, and she started up the stairs. Ron stayed at the foot of the girls' staircase and watched her go; she stopped halfway and looked down at him.

'Ron, what are you doing?'

'Just making sure you get up there okay,' said Ron, blushing. 'You know, uh, in case you fall or something...'

'Oh,' she said, smiling. 'That's very...sweet.' She looked at him with that smile and then continued up the stairs.

Ron waited until he heard the soft click of her door closing before he started up the boys' staircase. He entered the dorm room in a kind of semi-dazed state; he headed to his chest of drawers, pulled out his pyjamas, and changed into them.

'Have a nice snog with Hermione?' Harry murmured.

Ron looked up to see Harry sacked out in his bed, his glasses off. He was smirking.

'Were you waiting up to hear the details?' said Ron, rolling his eyes as he climbed into his own bed, which was almost too small for him now.

'I was just curious,' said Harry, grinning.

'It was good,' said Ron. 'What about you and Susan?'

'Good,' said Harry. There was a brief silence before he said, 'Well, g'night, Ron.'

'G'night, mate,' said Ron, closing his eyes and falling asleep almost at once. He dreamed of Hermione.

## *Chapter Seventeen: Discoveries*

January passed quickly into February. The weather, while still frigid, cleared up enough to allow for the resumption of Quidditch practices. It was too cold to spend hours out on the pitch at a time, but they were able to fit in an hour each night, four nights a week.

D.A. meetings resumed, with the focus on Patronuses and Protection Spells. Lessons became increasingly difficult; even without the pressure of O.W.Ls Ron, Harry and Hermione found themselves spending long hours in the library; when they weren't doing homework or studying for their lessons they were in the common room poring through Hermione's many medical books. They had resumed, too, their ritual of reading *The Daily Prophet* every day. Thus far, nothing new or worrisome had occurred, which only served to make Ron, Harry and Hermione more agitated and more determined than ever to discern Voldemort's plans.

Ron was so busy that he completely forgot about Valentine's Day and didn't even notice until just after Herbology.

‘What’d you get Hermione?’ Harry asked in a low voice, as he packed his wand, quill and books into his school bag.

‘For what?’ said Ron.

Harry shook his head. ‘Valentine’s Day, stupid.’

‘Valentine’s--that’s TODAY?’ Ron hissed, glancing at Hermione, who was deep in conversation with Susan Bones. The two girls glanced over at them and smiled.

‘Yeah, that’s today,’ said Harry. ‘You’d better get her something. This is, like, the most important holiday for girls.’ He grinned at Susan and left Ron standing there feeling like a complete dolt.

Hermione headed over to meet Ron and smiled sweetly at him, which only made Ron feel more wretched.

‘Hi,’ she said. ‘Fancy a walk before dinner?’ They headed out of the greenhouses.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘But, uh, a bit later, if that’s okay.’

‘Oh,’ said Hermione. ‘All right. When?’

‘Uh, half an hour?’ he said, without thinking. Hardly enough time to find her an appropriate gift but maybe he could write her a quick poem. Or something.

‘Okay,’ she said, but she gave him a slightly confused look when he pecked her on the cheek and dashed into the castle.

He raced back to the common room and into the dormitory to search his trunk, in the hopes of perhaps finding a few leftover Chocolate Frogs or Sugar Quills from his Christmas stash, but there were none left.

‘Bloody pig, how could I have eaten them all?’ he swore to himself. He began to dig through his trunk, tossing clothes every which way until he came to new, and as yet unworn, maroon jumper. It would be way too big for her and it had a big ‘R’ knitted in white wool on the front, but it was the only thing he could think of. At least it was new, anyway. He pulled a piece of parchment from his bag and took out his ink bottle and quill. He had no idea what to write to her. The notion of writing a poem seemed ridiculous now. In fact, the whole situation was ridiculous. How on earth could he have forgotten Valentine’s Day? What sort of boyfriend did that make him?

Harry hadn’t forgotten. Harry had probably bought Susan some really nice little gift and was probably giving her the gift right now, and she’d probably be delighted and snog Harry stupid for his trouble.

‘Shite,’ said Ron. Well, there was nothing to be done now. He only hoped Hermione wouldn’t stay angry with him for too long. It wasn’t like he had a lot of money to spend on her anyway. Perhaps he could make it up to her by carrying her books for the rest of the year.

He hurtled down the spiral staircase, jumper in hand, just in time to see her clamber through the portrait hole. She was alone.

He stood stock-still in the middle of the common room, the jumper rolled up and held behind his back.

‘Ron?’ she asked, looking at him quizzically. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Uh,’ he said dumbly. ‘Waiting for you.’

‘Oh,’ she said, smiling. ‘I was just going to drop my books here before our walk.’ She set her books down on the coffee table.

‘Oh, right,’ said Ron, smiling nervously.

‘Ron, what do you have behind your back?’ Hermione asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

‘Nothing,’ he said lamely.

She gave him a very knowing look.

‘Uh, well,’ he stammered. ‘It’s--your Valentine’s Day present.’ He blushed very red and felt incredibly ridiculous.

‘My Valentine’s Day present?’ she asked. ‘You got me a Valentine’s Day present?’

‘No--yeah,’ he said quickly. ‘I mean, I sort of, well--’

‘Valentine’s Day is today? I completely forgot,’ Hermione said, sounding bemused. ‘I guess I was so caught up in school and research and things.’

‘You--you FORGOT about Valentine’s Day?’ Ron said, amazed. What sort of girl forgot Valentine’s Day? To hear girls talk about the holiday it was the single most important day of the year.

‘Yes,’ Hermione said simply, walking toward him. ‘I mean, it’s really rather a silly holiday, isn’t it? Not a real holiday at all.’

‘It’s not?’ Ron asked, amazed.

‘Oh, no,’ said Hermione. ‘Valentine’s Day is really just a conspiracy by flower sellers and candy sellers and jewellery merchants to get people to buy more stuff and spend more money, isn’t it? You really didn’t have to get me a gift, you know, Ron. I didn’t exactly get you anything, I’m afraid. I really just didn’t think Valentine’s Day was all that important.’

‘Oh,’ said Ron, stunned.

‘But since you’ve already gone to the trouble,’ she went on, ‘maybe I could see what you got me.’

‘Well, uh,’ Ron stammered. ‘Actually, I forgot about Valentine's Day, too. I'm sorry! I just--it's been so busy, and--and, well. I felt guilty about not having anything for you so I went through my stuff and just--found this thing. It's new. I mean, uh, it's never been...used.’

He was so red he was sure his head resembled a giant tomato. He handed her the balled up jumper and looked down at his feet.

Hermione unrolled the jumper.

‘This...this is your jumper,’ she said.

‘Yeah, well, I--I didn't know what else to get you and I don't really like maroon much, not on me anyway, and--’ His voice gave out for a moment. ‘I'm sorry, 'Mione, it's stupid. I'll take it back and get you something proper. I mean, that thing has a big ‘R’ on it.’

‘No,’ said Hermione. ‘I like this. I'll keep it, if you don't mind.’

‘Hermione, it'll be way too big for you,’ Ron protested.

‘It'll be cozy to wear on cold nights,’ said Hermione. ‘And I rather like the big R on it. If I wear it I'll--I'll feel a bit closer to you.’ She blushed.

Ron hadn't considered it that way. It sounded nice.

‘Really?’ he said.

‘Oh, that sounds silly, doesn't it?’ she said, her face very flushed.

‘No,’ he said. ‘It doesn't sound silly.’ Actually, the idea of Hermione wearing his jumper sounded more than a bit...sexy. Ron suddenly realized he hadn't kissed her at all today and crossed to her.

‘I'm sorry I didn't get you anything,’ she said, looking ashamed.

‘I have you,’ he said. ‘That's...a good Valentine's Day present.’

Nice, Weasley, he thought. Nice and bloody corny as all hell.

‘Oh, Ron,’ said Hermione, and her eyes went soft and she put her arms round his neck, still clutching the jumper, and went up on her toes and pressed her lips to his. Ron made a mental note to say corny things to her more often.

They kissed for a good few minutes and it became deep and intense and Ron managed to kiss her neck again and put his arms round her waist and--Merlin!--slide his hands a bit lower than he ever had before. She was soft and round there. He heard Hermione sigh and THAT was quite exciting and then he felt her drop the jumper. He pulled her closer, revelling in the wonderful curviness of her beneath his hands, and began to lead her to the sofa...

She pulled away.

‘Um,’ she said, looking down at her shoes. ‘Maybe...we should go.’

‘Go?’ said Ron. Reluctantly he let go of her. His hands and other parts of him felt like they were burning up.

‘For our walk,’ said Hermione, taking one of his hands in hers. ‘Before we...um, do something...you know, that could get us in trouble.’

‘Oh,’ said Ron. No, let’s stay here, he wanted to say. Let’s go over to the sofa and keep doing what we were doing and you can let me put my hands back where they were because that was really nice. Instead he said, ‘Okay.’

‘Good,’ she said, circling behind him to pick up the jumper. ‘I’ll just drop this in my room and...and we’ll go.’

‘Right,’ he said, watching her as she turned and hurried up the girls’ staircase. He took a deep breath to calm himself down but it didn’t do much good.

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A week later Ron, Harry and Hermione were in the library, once again doing research amongst Hermione's many medical texts. They had taken to cross- referencing historical accounts of various disease outbreaks with their *History of Magic* textbooks, in the hopes of finding some connection, but thus far were not having much luck.

Ron's eyes were tired and he was developing a headache, but his eyes continued to scan the medical book he was reading and then back to the *History of Magic* text. He noticed a few pictures in that book; one of them--it looked like a print version of an old etching--depicted a woman tied to a burning stake; she had her mouth open in a scream and there was a smug looking priest and several others with him watching her burn. As it was a magic text, the picture moved. Flames seemed to lick at the witch's feet. Except that Ron knew real witches didn't burn at the stake. The caption beneath read '14th century etching from a typical pro-Inquisition placard depicting witch-burning in rural Italy.'

Next to the picture of the witch at the stake was another, larger picture, a similar 14th century etching, that showed bodies. Piles of them, burning. Next to the bodies was a crowd of people holding handkerchiefs over their noses. Again, there was a priest, and he held up a cross in his hand and looked to be intoning something. Behind the priest were several people on their knees, wailing. Beneath that picture was a caption: 'Depiction of the devastation of The Black Plague, circa 1350. Many church officials believed The Plague had supernatural causes and stepped up persecution of witches and warlocks.'

Black Plague, thought Ron, and he flipped to the index of the medical text and found it, then turned to the appropriate pages in that book.

His eyes went wide when he saw the picture in the medical text. It was an unmoving version of the same picture depicting the dead bodies, the intoning priest, the crowd behind him, some kneeling and wailing and throwing up their hands, others covering their faces with handkerchiefs.

'Hey,' he said in a low voice. 'Look at this.'

'What?' Harry and Hermione asked at once. Ron slid both books over to them and pointed to the matching pictures, one that moved and one that did not.

'The Black Death,' said Hermione. 'Wiped out a third of the population in Europe.'

‘That sounds pretty nasty to me,’ said Ron. ‘Sounds like something Voldemort would go for.’

‘Hmm,’ said Hermione. ‘I don’t know about that. Black Plague is pretty easy to cure these days. I’d think Voldemort would want something that’s tougher to cure.’

Ron considered this, but then thought of something else. ‘But, Hermione, you said that Voldemort would probably use magic to, you know, make the disease stronger.’

‘You did say that, Hermione,’ said Harry.

Ron pulled the books back and read the description of the disease in the medical book.

‘Bubonic Plague,’ he said, reading phrases from the medical book. ‘Brought over from China in 1347 by Italian shipping merchants who came into Sicily from a port in the Black Sea. By the time the ships docked, a bunch of the crew were already dead or infected. The Sicilian government tried to turn them away but it was too late. People on land got infected and it spread. Reached England the following summer.’

Harry and Hermione had stopped reading and were listening to Ron intently.

‘Go on,’ she said.

‘Right,’ said Ron. He gazed at the page, and his eyes went wide. ‘Bloody hell. Says here that by 1352, 25 million people were dead from the Plague. A third of the population. That was the worst of it but the disease kept coming back in smaller outbreaks for--for centuries. It didn’t die out completely until the 17th century.’

‘No disease every really dies out,’ said Hermione. ‘Most diseases burn hot for a while and then when enough people die, the disease goes dormant. Bubonic plague still shows up from time to time but it’s become very easy to cure. Unless Voldemort comes up with a way to make it more lethal, which is possible. I mean, that’s what I said before. The problem is, he could do that with any number of diseases.’

‘But,’ said Ron persistently, ‘THIS disease has connections to witches and warlocks, Hermione. All those witches and warlocks got blamed for all kinds of stuff, including this disease.’

‘That’s right,’ said Harry, taking up the theme. ‘And...it would be just like Voldemort, wouldn’t it, to use a disease that the wizarding world got blamed for and bring it back to wipe out Muggles. He’d, I dunno, think it was poetic justice or something.’

Hermione looked at both of them, her expression showing pleasant surprise.

‘What?’ said Ron, a bit defensively.

‘Nothing,’ said Hermione. ‘I mean, well, it...does make some sense, doesn’t it?’

‘Don’t be so shocked, Hermione,’ said Harry dryly. ‘You’re not the only one with a functioning brain.’

‘I didn’t mean--’ she began.

‘I know we didn’t get twenty-five O.W.Ls, ‘Mione, but we’re not *stupid*,’ said Ron, feigning a hurt expression, but he couldn’t help smiling.

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake,’ said Hermione, a bit loudly. Madam Pince shot her a nasty look.

Harry and Ron both sniggered. Ron looked back at the medical textbook.

‘It says that the bacteria that causes bubonic plague is...bloody hell, I have no idea how to pronounce this...Yer-see-ni-a pes-tis,’ he read slowly.

‘Close enough,’ said Hermione, shooting him a look that was a mixture of affection and annoyance.

‘*Yersenia pestis*,’ Ron repeated. ‘Is that Latin or Greek, Hermione?’

‘Shut up,’ said Hermione, rolling her eyes. Harry chuckled.

Ron read some more. ‘*Yersenia pestis* is believed to have been found in fleas...the fleas infested the ships that went to Sicily and bit the...rats on board, and the rats probably bit the sailors...’

‘Rats,’ repeated Harry.

‘Wormtail,’ said Ron and Hermione.

‘Wormtail,’ said Harry. ‘You think Voldemort’s going to use Wormtail to spread the disease somehow?’

‘Why not?’ said Ron. ‘If Voldemort can develop some sort of antidote to keep Wormtail from getting sick, of course. But he’s an Animagus, he can Apparate wherever he wants to go, hang out with some other rats and throw some fleas around or something--’

‘--and the fleas will bite people, who’ll get sick?’ said Harry doubtfully.

‘It does sound a bit far-fetched, Ron,’ said Hermione.

‘Yeah, well,’ said Ron, ‘you tell me, then, why Wormtail came back.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Hermione. ‘I mean, he’s obviously helping Voldemort.’

‘Let’s say you’re both right,’ said Harry. ‘Ron about Wormtail spreading the disease

and Voldemort about tweaking it to make it stronger or something. Even if that's all true, he can't kill *everyone*.'

They all looked at one another in silence and Ron retreated into his thoughts for a few moments when Hermione spoke up.

'He wouldn't necessarily have to kill all the Muggles,' said Hermione. 'Fascism by degrees.'

'Fash--what?' Ron asked.

'Fascism by degrees,' Hermione repeated. 'It's where somebody in power comes to be in power by slowly taking away people's freedoms and whatever. In Muggle history there's all sorts of examples. Usually a really powerful dictator gets power because he comes along when society is feeling vulnerable.'

'I still don't get it,' said Ron, feeling very stupid. Hermione's brain was just too fast, too complex for him.

'I'm saying,' said Hermione patiently, 'that all Voldemort has to do is kill enough people, and the right people at that, to create a panic. He can start by killing Muggle world leaders, set up some sort of government crisis. Then he lets loose with whatever disease he's got and thousands, or even millions of people die. His disease is incurable. The public health system can't handle the load of patients it's getting. The more people get sick and die, the fewer workers there are to keep the economy running. It's a ripple effect, see? And even if millions of Muggles are left, so much damage has been done that the world is in chaos. People become desperate and they'll look to anyone to restore what's been lost, to save them and protect them. That's where Voldemort comes in.'

Ron and Harry stared at her

'Wait,' said Ron. 'You're saying Voldemort's going to kill millions of people and then save the rest of them?'

'No,' said Hermione. 'I'm saying he could come along and make whoever's left *think* that he's going to save them, when in fact he'll just take away their freedoms bit by

bit. He'll tell them it's for their own good or whatever, and they'll be too shell-shocked to notice that he's stripping away their freedoms.'

'That's...well, that's just daft,' said Ron.

Hermione bristled. 'Ron, it's happened a million times throughout history, both in the wizarding world AND in the Muggle world. Which you'd know if you ever paid attention in Binns' classes.'

'Hermione's right, Ron,' said Harry.

'Are you paying attention in Binns' lessons all of a sudden?' said Ron, annoyed.

'No,' said Harry. 'But I remember reading about World War II when I was in primary school. It sounds like what happened with Hitler.'

'Exactly,' said Hermione, in a slightly smug tone of voice.

'Hitler,' said Ron. 'That...German nutter who went around invading Europe all the time?'

'And killing millions of people in the process,' said Hermione. 'He didn't do it by himself. He had quite a following of people willing to carry out atrocities for him. Just like Voldemort has.'

'But, Hermione,' said Harry. 'Even with all his Death Eaters and Dementors and whoever else, how's that enough--'

'If Voldemort's as clever as we think he is, he'll turn Muggles against Muggles,' said Hermione firmly.

‘How do you figure that?’ said Ron, trying to absorb everything Hermione was saying.

‘People are sheep when they’re scared,’ said Hermione. ‘All Voldemort needs to do is create enough panic and then act like a benevolent savior and people will be begging to do whatever he wants them to do. Not all of them, but enough. *That* is what I mean by fascism by degrees. He creates a panic, creates a power vacuum, steps in and takes over and restores order, then tells everyone to trust him and put their faith in him or whatever and they do, and then he’s able to create the kind of government or dynasty or whatever it is he wants. Before people realize what he’s actually doing is evil, it’s too late.’

‘That sounds bloody complicated,’ said Ron, shaking his head.

‘World domination is rarely simple, Ron,’ said Hermione, smirking. Ron glared at her and stuck his tongue out at her. She giggled and stuck her tongue out at him.

Harry rolled his eyes. ‘When you’re finished,’ he said.

‘Oh, yeah,’ said Ron. ‘Uh, well. That’s all very well and good, Hermione, but we still don’t know what virus he’s going to use.’

‘And there’s that book,’ said Harry. ‘Remember? He’s looking for some book.’

‘Right,’ said Hermione and Ron together. Ron had forgotten about The Book. Suddenly his brain was completely, utterly exhausted. There was simply too much information to process now.

‘I need to go after him,’ said Harry, after a brief silence. ‘I need to get inside Voldemort’s head.’

‘You mean--’ Hermione began.

‘Legilimency, yeah,’ said Harry. ‘I’ve got to do it, Hermione.’

‘Are you sure you're ready for that?’ Hermione asked. ‘Harry, it's so dangerous!’

‘I know,’ said Harry, ‘but I haven't had any visions in a while, and it's making me nervous. Voldemort knows I can see inside his head when he gets really angry or happy about something; maybe he's purposely trying to keep quiet so he doesn't accidentally let me in, you know? He slipped up before, letting me hear him talk about that book. But he's not stupid--he probably knows he slipped up letting me hear about the book, and he might be laying low, cutting himself off from me. He knows Dumbledore's going to be checking up on me and asking about whatever visions I have. If Voldemort's not going to get in my head, I need to get into his.’

Ron and Hermione nodded, both now too scared to speak.

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For the next several days Harry spent most of his free time in the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom, practicing Legilimency. Bill had given him special permission to use the classroom for that purpose and had barred other students from disturbing him.

This did not stop Draco Malfoy and his cronies Crabbe and Goyle from attempting to ambush Harry on one occasion when he left the classroom for the evening. The first time Harry managed to narrowly escape by using several powerful counterjinxes and a Protection Spell when Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle tried to hex him, but this caught the attention of Professor McGonagall, who happened to be rounding the corner into that same corridor. McGonagall promptly gave Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle a week's worth of detentions and deducted ten points from each of them. After that first night Ron and Hermione agreed to meet Harry late in the evenings after he practiced, so that at least they wouldn't be outnumbered if Malfoy's gang showed up again. Harry bristled at this but said nothing. He did, however, insist on seeing Susan after each session, so Ron and Hermione were forced to make the rather long trip to entrance to the Hufflepuff common room to meet up with her.

‘It's about time Malfoy and those two fatheads got some serious detentions,’ said Ron happily. ‘And get this. I hear McGonagall's making them scrub out every toilet in the school. With toothbrushes.’

‘Yeah,’ said Harry, smiling smugly. ‘And wouldn't you know Peeves has been causing the boys' loos to all back up. Nasty business, that.’

‘Poor things,’ said Hermione sarcastically.

The following evening when Ron and Hermione met Harry after his latest Legilimency practice session, during dinner, he rushed out of the classroom with a slightly feverish look in his eye, and he was covered in sweat.

‘What?’ said Ron, alarmed.

‘I'll tell you in the common room,’ said Harry, practically sprinting down the corridor,

Ron and Hermione at his heels. Apparently, Harry wasn't going to see Susan tonight.

They burst into the common room to find it empty.

'Tell us,' said Hermione, as they sat down in their favourite chairs in front of the dwindling fire.

'Voldemort's taken some more scientists,' said Harry. 'I think he's trying to use them to produce the disease. You know, replicate it and stuff.'

'How many?' Hermione asked.

'Seven of them this time,' said Harry. 'His Death Eaters are getting around. Lucius Malfoy seems to be in charge of it all.'

'Big surprise there,' said Ron dryly.

'It gets worse,' said Harry. 'Those Death Eaters in St. Mungo's, remember? The ones who didn't get away in that break-out at Azkaban? Well, they're out now. Malfoy and...and Dolohov, I think, managed to spring them out of hospital.'

'They've been in St. Mungo's all this time?' said Hermione.

'Under heavy security, yeah,' said Harry. 'Maybe the Ministry thought they'd be easier to deal with there. I dunno. But the point is, they're out.'

'Were you able to learn anything else about that book Voldemort wants?' Hermione asked.

Harry opened his mouth to answer but suddenly yelped and grabbed at his scar.

'Harry!' Ron and Hermione both cried, moving toward him.

'He knows...he knows I...dammit!' Harry said, rubbing furiously at his scar. Suddenly he stiffened and his eyes seemed to widen and glaze over. He spoke, but the voice was not his own. It was high pitched, cold, and utterly horrible.

'The book is the solution,' he said. 'The book has death and life. Poison and cure. Without it my plan won't work. Without it I cannot proceed. Get the book. It's in Hogwarts. Get the book.'

'Oh, my God,' Hermione whispered, gripping Ron's arm in terror as Harry's eyes rolled back. He jerked and closed his eyes and seized at his scar again and groaned.

'Ow!'

'Harry, we're taking you to Madam Pomfrey!' Hermione cried, standing up.

'No!' Harry snapped. His voice was back to normal. 'No. No hospital wing.' His breathing was slowing down and color was returning to his face.

‘Harry, you’re...you’re scaring us!’ Hermione said shrilly. ‘Voldemort’s hurting you!’

‘I know!’ Harry said. ‘I know. Hermione, please. You don’t understand, it’s the only way. Do you want to stop him from wiping out Muggles or don’t you?’

‘Yes!’ said Hermione. ‘But...but...’

‘We’re worried for you, mate, that’s all,’ said Ron. ‘We...we don’t know what it’s like, all right? I mean, we feel pretty useless when you...when you get all these visions and your scar hurts. We...we just wish we could do something, okay?’

Harry looked at both of them and swallowed; he seemed to suddenly find it very difficult to talk. ‘Thanks,’ Harry managed, looking down at his shoes.

There was a long silence in which none of them spoke. Hermione took Harry’s hand and clutched it in her own, and Ron put a hand on Harry’s shoulder, and they stayed like that for a while, Ron feeling miserable and helpless but at the same time knowing that Harry was right--there was no other way but for Harry to use Legilimency to keep one step ahead of Voldemort.

Eventually they got up and went to dinner, Harry announcing in an overly boisterous voice that he was starving. Dinner was excellent as always but Ron had to force himself to eat something. Harry, meanwhile, seemed to be feeling heartier and ate a sizeable meal.

‘Hi, Harry,’ said a voice behind him. It was Susan.

Harry looked up at her and the first genuine smile Ron had seen in days crossed his face.

‘Hi, Susan,’ he said. ‘I’m just finishing up here. Want to--’

‘Yeah,’ she said, cutting him off and blushing slightly. Ron and Hermione exchanged a glance and suppressed the urge to smile.

‘Well, I’ll see you two later, then, shall I?’ Harry asked, getting up from the table.

‘Bye, Harry,’ said Hermione, smiling warmly.

‘Watch out for McGonagall,’ Ron warned. ‘You’re on her good side at the moment; don’t mess that up by, well, you know.’ Harry punched Ron in the arm.

‘Bye, Susan,’ Hermione called as she and Harry headed out of the Great Hall. Susan waved to them both.

‘She’s very nice,’ Hermione commented as she took a bite of that night’s pudding.

‘Yeah, he seems pretty happy when he’s around her,’ Ron said, helping himself to a generous portion of treacle tart, his appetite returned at having seen Harry finally happy about something.

‘She’s good for him, you know?’ Hermione said in a thoughtful voice. ‘They seem to get along well, I think. She takes his mind off his problems.’

‘A good snog’ll do that,’ Ron said, his smirk turning into a wicked smile. ‘Speaking of which...’

‘Honestly, Ron,’ said Hermione, rolling her eyes. ‘Can’t you think of anything else?’ She blushed and smiled at him.

‘Not at the moment, no,’ he said, reaching across the table and taking her hand.

‘Hello, Hermione,’ a smooth voice intoned behind her. Ron looked up. It was Eddie Carmichael.

Hermione turned in her seat. ‘Oh, uh, hello, Eddie.’

‘Hello, Weasley,’ said Eddie, giving Ron an appraising and patronizing glance. ‘Sorry, am I interrupting anything?’

‘Yes,’ said Ron, but Hermione said ‘No’ at the same time, and Eddie seemed to have chosen to hear Hermione and ignore Ron. Ron gripped the bench on which he was sitting to keep from leaping at Eddie when the Head Boy slid onto the bench next to Hermione.

‘So, there’s a Hogsmeade visit coming up, finally,’ said Eddie, leering at Hermione. ‘How about you and me go? We don’t have babysitting duties anymore now that it’s just fifth years and up.’

Ron couldn’t believe it. He couldn’t believe Eddie Carmichael had the nerve to come here and ask Hermione on a date. Didn’t this prat know Ron and Hermione were already dating?

‘Oh, well,’ said Hermione, blushing and looking at Ron, who was clenching his teeth. She shot him a very significant look, and he bit back a nasty retort to Eddie. Let her handle it, Ron thought, or she’ll take it out on me.

‘Actually,’ she said slowly. ‘I’m going with Ron. We’re dating, you see.’

Something flashed in Eddie’s eyes that Ron distinctly did not like.

‘Oh, damn,’ said Eddie breezily, his voice belying the dangerous look in his eyes. ‘I guess I missed the boat on that one. Who’d have guessed Weasley’d win you before I did?’

‘He didn’t ‘win’ me,’ Hermione said, smiling through gritted teeth.

‘She's a girl, not a trophy,’ Ron said sharply, not knowing just where that came from, but judging by the satisfied look on Hermione's face, he guessed he'd said something good.

‘Of course she's not,’ said Eddie smoothly. ‘Well, if it doesn't work out with Weasley, Hermione, you know where to find me.’ He leered at her again and brushed her cheek with the back of his hand.

‘Do you mind?’ Ron said, struggling mightily to keep from pounding Eddie to a pulp right there.

‘Sorry, Weasley,’ said Eddie smugly, standing up and holding up his hands. ‘Can't blame me, though, can you? I mean, look at her. How do you keep your hands off her?’

‘I BEG your pardon!’ Hermione snapped, leaping up from the table.

‘You're out of line, Carmichael,’ Ron said, leaning over the table so that--he was pleased to see--he towered over the Eddie.

‘Yeah, well,’ said Eddie, ‘I'm also the Head Boy. You're just a prefect. So before you go thinking you can pummel me, remember I do have the power to make things difficult for you.’ He gave Ron a malicious smile and glided back to the Ravenclaw table, where he immediately started flirting with Padma Patil.

‘What a...that...that cretin!’ Hermione hissed.

‘You want me to pound him, ‘Mione?’ Ron asked, glaring at Eddie darkly. ‘Because, Head Boy or not, I've been dying to pound him since the day I met him. It'd be really satisfying, that.’

‘No!’ said Hermione quickly. ‘Just forget about him. He's nothing but a sleaze.’

‘You finally noticed,’ said Ron dryly.

‘I *knew* that,’ said Hermione defensively.

‘Whatever you say,’ said Ron, smiling at her and shaking her head. She blushed.

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Three hours later Ron and Hermione were in the common room. Ron was trying to finish another Potions essay. Harry had turned in early, exhausted from his visions earlier that evening. Hermione had taken over the table in the corner of the room, and it was covered with stacks upon stacks of books that she had checked out from the library. She had decided to embark on a mission to find the mystery book Voldemort was after.

‘The book has both ‘poison and cure’,’ she said in a slightly fevered voice. ‘That has to mean it has a potion or a spell in it that will make the disease do what he wants it to do and cure those he doesn’t want to get sick.’ She was now flipping through *Moste Potente Potions* but very quickly slammed the book shut.

‘Nothing,’ she said in frustration. ‘Plenty of poisons and their antidotes but nothing to connect it with a plague or disease that can wipe out whole countries.’

‘Maybe the book’s in the Restricted Section,’ Ron suggested. ‘You could get a note from McGonagall.’

‘Already got one,’ she said. ‘I spoke with her just after dinner. We’re supposed to be telling her or Dumbledore or Snape about what Harry’s seeing, remember? Anyway, she’s keen on me to find out and she told me she’d get the information to Dumbledore. They must be doing something with it for the Order.’

The next day Hermione spent every spare minute in the library. She was, she told Harry and Ron, going to find that book if she had to read every book in there to do it.

‘She’s serious, too,’ said Ron as he and Harry began flipping through a few books of their own. They were all now in the common room. Harry sat in a plush chair next to the roaring fire, and Ron and Hermione occupied the sofa.

‘Why doesn’t Voldemort use something like smallpox?’ Harry suggested, his eyes buried in *Pestilence Through the Ages*. ‘That’s really lethal.’

‘I thought about that,’ said Hermione. ‘But to be honest I keep going back to what Ron said. About the Black Plague. And Wormtail.’

‘Really?’ said Ron, surprised. He was quite sure his theory, which at the time seemed pretty good, had been dismissed.

‘Yes,’ said Hermione. ‘But I don’t have any proof. There’s just those few convenient coincidences. Of course, we’d know for sure if we could ever find. that *damn book!*’

Hermione had taken to swearing rather frequently in recent weeks.

Harry turned in soon after, once again very tired, but Ron and Hermione continued their research. Or they tried to. Ron was bleary-eyed and struggling to keep his eyes open at this point and he was on the verge of turning in himself when Hermione leaned over to him and kissed him soundly on the mouth.

‘What was that for?’ said Ron, forgetting for a moment how tired he was.

Hermione blushed. 'Well, aren't *you* sick of looking at this stuff?'

'Yes,' said Ron at once.

'So am I,' said Hermione, closing her book firmly and setting it on the coffee table. She gave him an expectant look.

'Mione, um, I'm kind of tired,' said Ron. Well, he was. Unlike her, reading didn't exactly fill him with excitement.

'Oh,' said Hermione, leaning in and kissing him softly on the lips. 'Are you sure?'

'Yeah,' he said, but he wasn't sure he really meant it. 'And...uh, reading about diseases doesn't really...put me in the mood...' His voice trailed off when she started to kiss his jaw, very lightly. Whoa.

Ron WAS tired but as was usual for him since the day they'd first kissed on the staircase, hormones trumped exhaustion.

'Never mind,' he said, and he kissed her.

Their kissing became more intense and Hermione lay back on the sofa and pulled him down with her. Whoa. They kissed like that for a while and Ron tried very hard not to let his hands wander but they just seemed to want to, so they did, a little. It was a bit difficult to really tell, because of her school robes, what that part of her truly felt like. Just that she was soft and wonderful there. He almost jumped out of his own skin when--bloody hell--her hands started to wander just a little, too...

'I've got it!'

Ron yanked his lips away from Hermione's, yanked his hand away from her breast; Hermione, in turn, shot up and her momentum caused Ron to tumble right off the sofa. He landed hard on his backside.

'What?' Ron and Hermione said together, feeling very embarrassed and Ron feeling extremely frustrated.

Whatever he's 'got,' Ron thought, had better be really bloody good. He shook his head and rubbed

Harry came hurtling down the spiral stairs in a kind of frenzy. He was in his pyjamas, his hair was sticking up all over the place, his glasses were askew on his nose, he was very pale and covered in a thin sheen of sweat. He looked as though he'd just awoken from a very bad dream.

'I know what book Voldemort is looking for.'

Chapter Eighteen: The Book of Morgan Le Fey

'It's *The Book of Morgan Le Fey*,' said Harry.

Hermione, who was now standing next to the sofa and smoothing her hair, stared at him.

'The Book of...are you sure, Harry?'

'Uh, excuse me,' said Ron, pulling himself up off the floor and rubbing his sore backside. 'What's this--'

'I'm positive,' said Harry. 'Voldemort, he tried to get into my head again, but I blocked him, only this time I got inside HIS head just long enough to hear him thinking about this book. Those were his exact words. *The Book of Morgan Le Fey*.'

‘And he thinks the book is here in Hogwarts?’ said Hermione, amazed.

Ron stared back at forth at his best mate and his girlfriend and felt the growing frustration of not knowing what they were talking about.

‘Hello, can anyone tell me--’

‘Yes,’ said Harry. ‘I mean, I’m almost positive he does. My other vision, remember? He said the book is in Hogwarts.’

‘But...but the book is supposed to be a myth,’ said Hermione. ‘There’s no evidence it even exists anymore.’

‘EXCUSE ME!’ Ron practically shouted. ‘Will you two please tell me what the bloody hell you’re talking about?’

Harry and Hermione looked at Ron for a moment, then Hermione spoke.

‘Don’t swear, Ron. It’s *The Book of Morgan Le Fey*,’ said Hermione. ‘It’s supposedly a book that Morgan Le Fey wrote and left behind. The legend is that it contains some of the most powerful magical spells in the world. But nobody’s ever been able to prove that it still exists. Or that it *ever* existed.’

‘Oh,’ said Ron. ‘Wait, how do you know all this, Hermione?’

‘It’s in the *History of Magic* textbook, Ron!’ said Hermione exasperatedly.

‘Right,’ said Ron. ‘So I wouldn’t have seen it.’

Hermione rolled her eyes. 'I can't believe you got an "A" on your History O.W.L.'

'I owe it all to you, 'Mione, and your brilliant note-taking,' said Ron, grinning.

'You're trying to flatter me,' said Hermione, blushing.

'Is it working?' said Ron.

'Oh, for god's sake,' said Harry, rolling his eyes. 'I think I liked you two better when you weren't snogging all the time.'

'Harry!' said Hermione.

'You should talk!' Ron protested. 'You're the one always running off with Susan.'

'As I was saying,' said Harry forcefully. 'About this book that Morgan Le Fey supposedly wrote--'

'Morgan, as in King Arthur's sister, Morgan?' said Ron.

'Half-sister,' Hermione corrected. She turned to Harry. 'We have to tell McGonagall about this, and Dumbledore.'

'What, now?' said Harry and Ron together.

'Yes, now,' said Hermione.

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Ron, Harry and Hermione all stood stock still in Dumbledore's office. Professors McGonagall and Snape stood behind Dumbledore's chair, Bill stood to the left of the desk and Dumbledore himself sat there quietly, surveying the three of them but fixing his eyes repeatedly on Harry, who was still in his pyjamas. He had calmed down significantly since telling Ron and Hermione about his vision. Ron was still a bit sceptical, however, that this *Book of Morgan Le Fey* Harry told them about was really the book Voldemort wanted.

'You are certain Voldemort named this particular book?' Dumbledore asked, looking at Harry very intently.

'Yes, sir,' said Harry, sounding a bit defensive. 'I'm positive.'

'This vision,' Dumbledore went on, 'you did not initiate it?'

'No, sir,' said Harry, 'it came on me. Voldemort was trying to get inside my head again, but I blocked him and--and I was able to get inside his own mind just long enough to hear him think about this book.'

Dumbledore nodded and sat back in his chair, closing his eyes. He looked incredibly old just then, old and tired. For a long moment nobody spoke; everyone seemed to be waiting for Dumbledore.

'I believe you, Harry,' said Dumbledore slowly. 'But I am concerned. I am aware that you have become very skilled at both Occlumency and Legilimency, but I wonder if perhaps you are using Legilimency too much.'

'What do you mean?' Harry asked, his voice rising just a bit.

Uh oh, Ron thought, don't lose your temper now.

'Harry, Legilimency is a very useful skill,' said Dumbledore. 'But you are not using this skill on just any wizard. Your connection with Voldemort runs very deep, far deeper than it does with any other wizard. Voldemort knows you are trying to use Legilimency on him. He is able to block your efforts much of the time but he knows by now that you have been successful on at least a few occasions. It would be in his character to allow you access to his mind, only to offer you false clues. He has done it before.'

'This isn't like last year!' Harry yelled. Ron gulped--he couldn't believe Harry was mouthing off to the Headmaster. But Harry didn't seem to notice anyone else was in the room, and he kept up his tirade. 'You think I don't know Voldemort isn't trying to trick me? I've worked my arse off trying to close my mind to him. Do you know what it's like always having to be *aware* of what you're thinking? I haven't even had two seconds to let my mind wander!'

Dumbledore did not seem perturbed in the slightest that Harry was giving him lip.

‘That is my concern,’ Dumbledore said. ‘Part of the discipline of Occlumency is learning to let your mind rest. You have been concentrating so very hard on perfecting your skills that you are exhausted. No, let me finish,’ Dumbledore continued, holding up his hands to head off another retort by Harry.

‘As I said, I believe you,’ said Dumbledore. ‘I also believe that Voldemort is indeed looking for this book. He seems to think it is in this school somewhere. Of course we will begin a very thorough search for it, and we will increase security. But I also believe Voldemort wanted you to know about the book for some reason, Harry. Perhaps he means to use you to lead him to it. I cannot say. But I can and I shall order you not to engage in Legilimency any more without express permission from me, and then, only in my presence will you be allowed to use it.’

‘But Professor--’

‘That is my final say on the matter, Harry,’ said Dumbledore in a firm voice. Harry nodded, looking down at his feet.

‘That said,’ Dumbledore went on, ‘I will allow you three to continue your research into this matter. In fact I’d like to ask that you do so. As you can imagine, our own duties make such a job impossible for us to take on. I must ask, however, for your discretion in this matter. Do not let other students know what you are up to. We must not create a panic situation, and we must not let Voldemort become aware that we are on to him.’

‘Sir,’ Ron said very quietly, ‘I, uh, well, I think my sister might--’

‘You are not to tell your sister, Mr. Weasley,’ said Dumbledore. ‘Miss Weasley has a history with Voldemort, too. She barely survived being possessed by him. Voldemort could use her to his advantage as well. Indeed, if anyone is in as much danger as Harry, it is Ginny. Leave her out of it for now.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Ron, nodding, not wanting to think about Voldemort hurting Ginny. He looked at Bill, whose jaw was set but whose face otherwise betrayed no emotion. Snape, meanwhile, was staring at a spot somewhere on Dumbledore’s desk, seemingly determined to avoid looking at the three of them.

‘You three are excused,’ said Dumbledore. ‘Try and get some sleep tonight. Minerva, would you be so kind as to escort them back to Gryffindor tower?’

‘Of course,’ said McGonagall, leading Ron, Harry and Hermione from Dumbledore’s office.

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‘Here it is,’ said Hermione, staring at a page in her book in *The Great Witches of Early Britannia*. They were all sitting in the common room, very early in the morning the next day, none of them having slept much. She paraphrased aloud.

‘Morgan Le Fey. The most powerful and controversial woman of her time. Arthur’s half-sister and sometimes his enemy. Some accounts say she spent her childhood in a convent and instead of absorbing lessons of Christianity she learned the Dark Arts. Others say she left the convent and joined an order of priestesses who were devoted to Goddess worship--a female-centered pagan religion. She was a shape-shifter and an Animagus; she could transform herself into any living animal or human form she chose. Some believed her to be an earthly representative of one of the three aspects of the Goddess herself--the Crone, the old wise woman aspect. Most accounts also show her as the most powerful healer of her day; she brought Arthur to the Isle of Apples to heal him after he’d been wounded in battle. She was such a powerful healer that most people feared her. She married a king named Uriens and had several children by him, mostly daughters; she took a lover named Accolon. She was considered alternately a witch, a goddess, a priestess, and a queen of the fairies (hence the name ‘Le Fey’). Men seemed to fear her most of all because of her powers and her knowledge; the dictates of the times did not allow women to possess knowledge and power. But by all accounts the history is so obscured by legends and falsehoods that it is nearly impossible to determine who she really was.’

‘Yeah, but what about this book of hers?’ Harry asked impatiently.

‘I’m getting to that,’ Hermione said. ‘According to this, Morgan assembled a magical book of spells. The spells were supposedly so powerful that if anyone other than Morgan tried to perform them, he or she would die. Only Morgan herself was strong enough to make the spells work--’

‘If that’s true then Voldemort won’t get any use out of the book,’ Harry interrupted. ‘Why bother with it if he can’t even use it?’

‘There’s more,’ said Hermione. ‘Only Morgan herself was strong enough. Or Morgan’s direct female descendants.’

Ron and Harry looked at one another, then at Hermione.

‘And not just any female descendants. The oldest living direct female descendants, on Morgan’s side, and they had to be witches,’ said Hermione, her eyes riveted to her book. ‘Morgan enchanted the book with a sort of beacon so that the oldest living witch in her bloodline always knew where it was, and the book itself could seek out its owner. Some sort of ancient magic having to do with blood ties.’

‘What, it has some kind of magical radar on it?’ Harry asked sceptically.

‘It looks that way,’ said Hermione. ‘Morgan didn’t want it to get lost, it looks like. So she charmed the book to ensure that its rightful owner finds it, or won’t stop looking until she’s found it.’

‘Why the oldest witch in the bloodline?’ said Ron. ‘Why not a wizard in her bloodline, too?’

‘Probably she only wanted women to use it,’ said Hermione. ‘It makes sense; men persecuted her, why give them something so powerful? It’s like she was, I don’t know, striking a blow against the medieval patriarchy or something.’

‘What sort of spells are supposed to be in this book, anyway?’ said Ron.

‘Nobody knows,’ said Hermione. ‘Just that they’re more powerful than anything on earth.’

‘Dark magic?’ said Harry. ‘Well, it would be, if Voldemort wants it.’

‘Some of it, yes,’ said Hermione. ‘But not all of it. Morgan knew the Dark Arts but she was also a healer. It’s likely that the book contained powerful spells for both sides.’

Ron’s eyes widened. ‘You mean, like, “poison and cure”?’

Hermione beamed at him. ‘Exactly.’

‘So, this book...it could have a spell in it that would make a deadly poison but it would also have the antidote,’ said Ron slowly. ‘And Voldemort, he could use the poison on whoever he wants to kill but...but he can give the antidote to his cronies?’

‘Theoretically, yes,’ said Hermione. ‘But there is the wrinkle that only a female descendant of Morgan, a witch, can perform the spells.’

‘Right,’ said Ron.

‘You said that nobody has proof the book ever existed, though,’ said Harry doubtfully.

‘That’s true,’ said Hermione, looking down at her own book, ‘but legendary accounts do trace the book up to...oh my.’

‘What?’ Ron and Harry said, now rapt with attention.

‘The book seems to have disappeared in 1350. Right at the height of the Black Death,’ she said. ‘Listen to this.’

‘In that same year, a young woman named Elaine-- interesting, some legends say Morgan had a sister named Elaine, but this would obviously be a different Elaine-- was accused of witchcraft and arrested. The local priests and authorities thought she had brought the plague on their village. They burned her at the stake. History suggests that she was a direct descendant of Morgan.’

‘But, if she was a witch,’ Harry said, ‘why’d she burn at the stake? Real witches didn’t burn at the stake.’

There was a brief silence as they mulled this over.

‘She could have been a Squib,’ suggested Ron suddenly.

‘That’s as good an explanation as any,’ said Hermione. ‘All wizard families have a Squib somewhere in them. Morgan was married to a Muggle, so her daughters were half-bloods, which makes it even more likely. If she was a Squib, she couldn’t have used the book. It says here that Elaine left behind a daughter, but nobody knows who she is or if she was a witch or not.’

‘But the book disappears after that?’ said Harry.

‘Looks that way,’ said Hermione. ‘But if it’s charmed to seek out its owner, surely it didn’t stay lost. And then there’s the magic Morgan used, the blood ties. A witch who’s the direct descendant of Morgan would know about the book somehow, just by virtue of her blood tie to Morgan.’

‘Back up,’ said Ron. ‘So, if only a witch can use the book, does that mean if a descendant of Morgan doesn’t have a daughter in there, the book stays hidden--’

‘Until the next witch in the blood line comes along and is old enough to claim it, yes,’ said Hermione. ‘The book gets passed down, apparently. But never to a son. Only a daughter.’

‘So...Voldemort doesn’t just want the book,’ said Harry. ‘He wants...whoever this witch is. Because without her he can’t use the spells in the book.’

Ron and Hermione looked at him, and Hermione nodded, and the realization of just what they had learned sank in for Ron.

‘The book seeks out its rightful owner,’ said Harry.

‘And Voldemort is convinced the book is here in the school,’ said Hermione.

‘Which means--’ said Harry.

‘--if Voldemort’s right--’ said Ron.

‘--then the oldest living female descendant of Morgan Le Fey is here at Hogwarts,’ said Hermione.

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A week later the three of them sat in the common room with stacks of genealogical charts they’d checked out from the library. McGonagall had given them access to the Restricted Section, and they were poring over everything they could get their hands on, searching for a clue as to the identity of the oldest living female descendant of Morgan Le Fey.

‘Here’s something,’ said Ron. ‘Looks like Rowena Ravenclaw was a descendant of Morgan.’

‘So maybe we should start looking at Ravenclaws,’ Harry suggested. ‘Makes sense, doesn’t it? Ravenclaws are supposed to be the house where all the smart ones end up.’

‘Hermione’s a genius and she’s a Gryffindor,’ said Ron, glancing at Hermione. She didn’t look up at him, but she blushed and seemed to be trying not to look too pleased with the compliment.

‘Thank you, Ron,’ she said, still not looking at him. ‘But the Ravenclaw connection could be just a coincidence.’

‘True,’ said Ron, and as he looked over the charts in his pile he realized that Hermione was probably right. The records simply didn’t show any evidence of a strong connection between Ravenclaw the house and Morgan Le Fey.

‘Damn,’ said Harry. ‘These charts don’t show anything after 1350. The year Elaine died.’

‘Neither do mine,’ said Hermione in frustration.

‘Nothing here, either,’ said Ron.

And for the next week, while they were able to trace descendants of Morgan prior to 1350, they could find nothing to indicate who the descendants were AFTER 1350. It was as if the bloodline itself died out.

In the meantime, Ron nearly forgot about his birthday, until Harry woke him up on the morning of the first of March and said, ‘Happy Birthday, mate,’ and presented him with a handsome broomstick case.

‘Thanks,’ said Ron sleepily, rubbing his eyes and getting out of bed. ‘Blimey, I almost forgot.’

‘Damn,’ said Harry. ‘Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything. Then I could have returned your present and gotten my money back.’

‘Ha ha,’ said Ron.

So, I’m seventeen, he thought. It didn’t feel all that different from being sixteen, and yet the very word seventeen made him seem a lot older.

He and Harry went down to breakfast and surprisingly, Hermione wasn’t there. Ron quickly became inundated with birthday mail: cards and notes from his family members, along with a few simple gifts from his family. He was just finishing his breakfast when Hermione came into the Great Hall. She looked tired and apprehensive.

‘Hey, ‘Mione,’ said Ron. ‘What’s up? You look knackered.’

‘I’m fine,’ she said, and she smiled weakly at him. ‘Happy Birthday.’

‘Thanks,’ said Ron, grinning. ‘So, what’d you get me?’

Hermione blushed. ‘Oh, well. Um, I thought I’d give it to you later.’ She didn’t look at him as she poured herself a glass of orange juice.

‘Okay,’ said Ron lightly. Harry glanced at Hermione, then at Ron, and smirked.

‘What?’ said Ron. Hermione was blushing deeper now and staring resolutely at her cereal as she ate.

‘Nothing,’ said Harry, finishing off his eggs.

The day went on and Hermione still hadn't given Ron his birthday present. He spent the whole day wondering just what it could be. It would be the first time she'd bought him a gift since they started dating. He remembered her telling him that he was difficult to shop for, and he wondered if in fact she hadn't actually found him a gift yet at all. He even wondered, for a whole horrified minute, if she hadn't in fact forgotten his birthday altogether, but then he dismissed that idea. Hermione was practical and organized; she never forgot things like birthdays. Ron would just have to be patient. But later on that night, as he and Hermione sat once again in the common room poring over more genealogical charts and research books, Ron was still without his gift from her. Being the proud sort he was, he didn't say anything, but he couldn't help feeling a bit resentful.

'There has to be SOME record of it somewhere!' Hermione said angrily as she slammed yet another book shut. Harry was taking a walk with Susan. 'Morgan Le Fey is the most famous witch who ever lived, for heaven's sake! There has to be a record of her descendants!'

'Maybe there is but it's not in the school,' Ron suggested, a bit timidly, for he was always a bit afraid of her when she got into one of her tempers. And by the way, he thought, where's my bloody birthday present?

Hermione opened her mouth to yell but then stopped and looked at Ron. 'Of COURSE!' she said, smacking herself on the forehead. 'I'm an idiot. Of course Hogwarts doesn't have every genealogical chart in the world! I'll write to Longbottom Library, they'd probably have it.'

'Longbottom Library?' Ron asked. 'As in NEVILLE Longbottom?'

'Naturally,' said Hermione, as though this were common knowledge. 'If you EVER got around to reading *Hogwarts, a History* you'd know that half the collection in this school was once housed in that very library, or that it was founded by Septimus Longbottom over 500 years ago, who's Neville's great great great--well, however many 'greats' it is--grandfather. It's right in Diagon Alley, haven't you ever seen it?'

'Why do I need to read *Hogwarts, a History* when I can just rely on you, love?' Ron asked, chucking her gently on the chin, momentarily forgetting about his missing birthday present. He always found it amusing when she got all worked up over books. 'And why would I know about a library in Diagon Alley? When have you *ever* seen me go to a library unless I absolutely had to?'

'Did you just call me "love?"' Hermione asked, looking at him through narrowed eyes.

'Oh,' said Ron, realizing what he'd just said. 'I guess I did. Sorry.'

'No, it's sweet,' said Hermione. 'I like it. But you still should read *Hogwarts, a History* AND you should really take a look at Longbottom Library.'

'Whatever you say, love,' Ron said, grinning. Hermione smiled and rolled her eyes.

The portrait hole opened and Harry clambered into the common room.

‘Hiya, Harry,’ Ron said, looking up from the genealogy chart he was studying.

‘Hey,’ Harry called, crossing to them and sitting down. ‘No luck on finding this mystery witch, eh?’

‘Nah,’ said Ron. ‘Bloody charts are incomplete. Hermione’s going to write to...hey, did you know Neville Longbottom’s family founded this big library?’

‘No,’ said Harry. ‘Lemme guess; that little factoid can be found in *Hogwarts, a History*.’

‘Right you are, mate,’ said Ron, rolling up the chart he was studying and heaving a sigh. ‘Nothing here that’s useful. So far everything dries up when that Squib Elaine died. 1350. That’s a hell of a lot of missing years and missing descendants we need to find.’

‘Well, I can tell you Susan definitely isn’t it,’ said Harry. ‘Not directly descended anyway.’

‘What?’ Hermione said, sitting up sharply and staring at him. ‘You didn’t tell her about what we’re doing, did you?’

‘Yes,’ said Harry defiantly. ‘She’s my girlfriend, isn’t she?’

‘Harry, I don’t think--’

‘Hermione, if he can’t trust his own girlfriend, who can he trust?’ Ron asked. ‘Susan doesn’t strike me the type to go blabbing, anyway.’

‘Exactly,’ said Harry, sounding a bit defensive. ‘Look, Hermione, Susan knows to keep this quiet, okay?’

‘How does she know she’s not related to Morgan Le Fey?’ Ron asked.

‘She’s got her own family chart,’ said Harry. ‘She showed it to me in the Hufflepuff common room, actually. Her mother’s family is distantly related to yours, though, Ron. Did you know?’

‘You’re kidding,’ said Ron.

‘Nope,’ said Harry. ‘But it’s like Sirius said. All the pure-blood families are interrelated somehow. She’s also related to the Malfoys, but that’s going way back.’

Ron nodded; he just realized that Harry had said Sirius’s name for the first time in months without looking as though he were trying not to cry.

‘Well, that rules Susan out,’ said Hermione. ‘But we’re still talking hundreds of girls in this school, not to mention the possibility that it’s a professor, although I asked McGonagall and she said she’s definitely not it and she’ll ask the other professors. But we can’t go around asking to see everyone’s family trees. Not if we hope to find out who this girl is in a span of less than a century and not if we hope to keep this quiet.’

The portrait hole opened again and Neville Longbottom entered. He was carrying his *mimulus mibletonia* plant. It was larger than it had been a few months ago but Neville still managed to carry it under one arm.

‘Hi, Harry!’ he called, smiling brightly at them. ‘Ron, Hermione.’

‘Hiya, Neville,’ said Ron. ‘Uh, why are you carrying that around? We finished those things in Herbology ages ago.’

‘This?’ Neville asked, setting down his plant on a nearby table. ‘Well, actually, I’m helping Professor Sprout do a few experiments with it. You know, herbal remedies, that sort of thing. Anyway, it’s my own plant, but you knew that. I like having it around. I mean, as long as you don’t poke it, it’s a pleasant thing, isn’t it?’

‘Uh, yeah,’ said Ron, trying to sound enthusiastic about Neville’s obvious delight over his rather ugly plant.

‘Neville,’ said Hermione, ‘do you think it would be all right if I owed your grandmother about getting something from the Longbottom Library?’

‘Uh, sure,’ said Neville, a little uncertainly. ‘What do you need?’

‘Just a genealogical chart,’ said Hermione. ‘The ones here don’t have what I’m looking for and I thought the library would.’

‘I could owl her if you like,’ said Neville. ‘I’m just on my way up to do that anyway. I went and melted my cauldron again, so I need a new one.’

‘But...your cauldron was fine in Potions!’ Hermione said.

‘This was just now,’ said Neville miserably. ‘With Professor Sprout. Apparently if you mix stinksap with Echinacea leaves and eucalyptus oil, it becomes really acidic and eats through stuff.’

‘Sorry to hear it, Neville,’ said Harry, but he was struggling not to smile. Neville had gone through at least a dozen cauldrons by now.

‘All right, then,’ said Hermione. ‘Thanks, Neville.’

Neville gave her a wide smile and he trooped up the stairs to the boys dormitory, carrying his *mimulus mibletonia* under his arm.

‘You’d think that thing was a dog or a cat or something,’ Ron noted. ‘The way he dotes on it. What are you doing?’ he added, noticing that Hermione was now writing what looked like a letter.

‘Writing to Neville’s grandmother, of course,’ said Hermione. ‘You think Neville is really going to remember to do it?’

‘True,’ said Ron. Neville’s forgetfulness was by now legendary.

‘I’m beat,’ Harry announced. ‘I’m turning in. G’night.’

‘Good night, Harry,’ said Hermione absently.

‘G’night, mate,’ said Ron, giving Harry a wave as the other boy started climbing the stairs.

Ron was alone with Hermione now, and at once his curiosity over his as yet to be had birthday present flooded his mind.

Hermione sighed and rolled up the last of the genealogical charts she was studying.

‘I give up,’ she said. ‘I’m exhausted.’

‘Me, too,’ said Ron. Where’s my present? he thought.

‘Oh!’ said Hermione. ‘I almost forgot. Your birthday present!’

Ron blinked. It was as if, on occasion, she could read his mind. He wasn’t sure whether to be pleased or disconcerted by this. But at the moment he was just happy she hadn’t forgotten.

She was rummaging in her school bag. 'Got it,' she said, and she pulled it out.

'It' turned out to be a small teddy bear with a red and gold tie round its neck. In its 'paws' was a rolled up piece of parchment, like a small scroll.

'Happy birthday,' she said, handing him the bear. Ron took it and tried to hide the confused and slightly disappointed look on his face.

'Thanks,' he said. A teddy bear? What in the name of Merlin would a seventeen year old boy want with a teddy bear?

'It's to replace the one Fred turned into a spider,' said Hermione, smiling and looking a quite satisfied with herself.

'Oh,' said Ron, studying the bear. It was cute, he had to admit, but still. A teddy bear?

Don't be a prat, he thought. Pretend you like it.

'It's great, love,' he said, and he gave her a kiss on the cheek.

'Ron,' said Hermione. 'You're not done.'

'Done with what?' said Ron.

Hermione blushed again and waved a hand at the bear. 'You're...you're supposed to read the parchment.'

‘Oh,’ said Ron. ‘Right.’ He slipped the parchment from the paws of the stuffed bear and unrolled it and began to read.

His eyes went wide, and he was quite sure had he not blinked, that his eyeballs would have fallen out of his skull. He read the note again and almost pinched himself to make sure he wasn’t dreaming. A grin spread across his face.

‘Cool,’ he said, and he looked at Hermione.

She was so red she looked like a tomato wearing a bushy brown wig.

‘You, uh, you...you mean it?’ said Ron, filling a thrill rush through his veins.

‘Yes,’ said Hermione.

‘Now?’ said Ron eagerly.

‘It’s still your birthday for the next--’ she looked at her watch, ‘--twenty-six minutes. Just...no funny business, all right. Nothing more than what’s in the note. You have to promise to behave yourself.’

‘Do I have to?’ said Ron, pouting. ‘It’s my birthday.’

‘Ron.’

‘I’ll behave,’ said Ron. ‘I swear. Just get over here.’

She giggled as he pulled her close and kissed her and in a matter of seconds they had moved to the sofa.

It turned out to be quite difficult to behave, in fact. The kissing alone was enough to drive him mad; he was alive down below in a matter of seconds. The moment his hands moved beneath her jumper and blouse Ron had to fight the urge to grope her like a randy madman, and he instead forced himself to go slow. In going slow, he learned a few things. He learned that she was a bit ticklish on the sides of her tummy. He learned that her skin was the softest thing he'd ever touched in his life. He learned that she appeared to favour lace bras--or maybe she was just wearing one tonight. He wasn't sure which possibility excited him more. He learned that she was on the small side up front but that her breast fit nicely in his hand and that this particular part of a girl's body was bloody brilliant.

It was the best birthday present, and the best twenty-five minutes and forty-five seconds, of his entire life.

## *Chapter Nineteen: The Descendant of Morgan Le Fey*

Ron awoke the next day with a smile on his face.

He had a smile plastered on his face as he quickly showered, combed his hair, brushed his teeth and yanked on his school uniform. When he wasn't smiling, he was whistling softly. A few times he opened his desk drawer to read the little note Hermione had written him, containing the details of his fantastic birthday present. His face felt hot as he read the note and his hands tingled and his smile got bigger. He read through the note one last time and stuffed it into the back of his desk drawer out of sight (Hermione had made him promise, "on pain of the worst Bat Bogey Hex ever", to keep the note safely hidden away).

Seamus, Dean and Neville had all gone down to breakfast already. Ron was pulling on his school jumper when Harry came into the room, wrapped in a towel and freshly showered.

'Hey,' he said absently, running a hand through his wet hair.

'Hi!' said Ron brightly, putting on his school tie.

'You're in a good mood,' said Harry, as he pulled on boxer shorts.

'Yeah, well, it was my birthday yesterday,' said Ron.

'You're grinning like the village idiot because it was your birthday yesterday?' said Harry archly, as he put on his shirt and began to button it.

'Yeah, well, it was a good birthday,' said Ron, trying to sound non-committal as he tucked his tie into his jumper and sat down on his bed to pull on his socks.

‘Uh huh,’ said Harry, eyeing him suspiciously while pulling on his trousers. ‘By the way, what did Hermione end up getting you?’

Ron pursed his lips to keep from grinning, but the grin won. His ears went red. ‘Just...something,’ he said. He pulled on his shoes.

‘Something,’ said Harry, staring at him. Like...what?’

‘Bloody hell, Harry, I’m not going to give you the blow by blow,’ said Ron, rolling his eyes.

‘There was blowing involved?’ said Harry, chuckling. This earned him a pillow in the face. ‘Ow!’

‘Prat. Look, it was just, you know, a bit of stuff, okay?’ said Ron.

‘Okay,’ said Harry. ‘Stuff. I get it. It’s not like I want details or anything.’

He pulled on his tie and for a long moment there was silence as he finished putting on his uniform. He looked at Ron again, and for another long moment they looked at one another. Ron couldn’t help it; he really DID want to tell someone. It was all new to him and he felt like if he didn’t tell SOMEONE he’d burst, and who better than Harry?

Except that Hermione would kill him if she knew he’d said anything.

But Harry wouldn’t go blabbing...

‘So what hap--’ Harry began.

‘Under her shirt,’ Ron blurted.

‘Whoa,’ said Harry, sitting down swiftly on Ron’s bed. ‘Just the jumper or blouse as well?’

‘Blouse,’ said Ron.

‘Bra on or off?’

‘Definitely on.’

‘Lace or satin?’

‘Lace--wait a minute! How the bloody hell do you know all this stuff?’ said Ron.

Harry gave him a slightly smug smile and shrugged.

Ron swatted him on the back of the head. ‘You dog.’

‘Hey, Susan and I have been going out longer than you two,’ said Harry.

‘You’ve...you know, with her, and...no bra?’ said Ron.

‘Yeah,’ said Harry. ‘A few times.’

‘Blimey,’ said Ron, and that sent his mind reeling toward imagining what Hermione might feel and look like without...

‘So how was it?’ said Harry. Ron blinked.

‘How do you think?’ he said. ‘Bloody fantastic, that’s what.’

‘Best birthday present ever?’ said Harry, grinning.

‘Best *any* present,’ said Ron. ‘And that includes my Cleansweep.’

‘Well, congrats, mate,’ said Harry, clapping him on the back.

‘Look, Harry, you can’t say anything to anyone, okay?’ said Ron quickly. ‘Hermione would do her nut if she found out I told you.’

‘Ron, it’s me you’re talking to,’ said Harry. ‘I’m not gonna say a word, okay?’

‘Okay,’ said Ron. ‘And I won’t say anything about you and Susan. I swear.’

‘Is this the part where we prick our fingers and swear a blood oath?’ said Harry.

‘You’re a cheeky toe rag, you know that?’ said Ron. ‘What’s gotten into you lately, anyway?’

‘Think about why you’re in a good mood,’ said Harry lightly. ‘Same for me. Sure as hell takes my mind off the fact that some all powerful Dark Wizard with a homicidal streak is out to kill me, or that I have to try and read his sick, twisted mind.’

Ron blushed and looked away. 'Right,' he said. 'Sorry.'

'It's okay, mate,' said Harry. 'Look, uh...I know...I've been a real arse. I have. I was a real shit to you and Hermione last year and I couldn't handle all the stuff being thrown at me and I should have...I should have let you help me more. And I know...I know I haven't talked...to you and Hermione about...about Sirius. I know you two worry about me and what but...I'm dealing with stuff, okay? Honest. Susan...she helps me with that stuff. We talk about stuff.'

'Stuff you can't talk about with me or Hermione,' said Ron.

'Ron--'

'It's cool, Harry,' said Ron, holding up his hand and feeling extremely uncomfortable. Their friendship had changed so much in the past year and a half that Ron didn't quite know what to make of it. He would have given his right arm to be able to take away some of Harry's burden, but he couldn't. Susan seemed to be the only one who could get past that barrier Harry had put up around himself. The knowledge that he couldn't help his best mate as much as he wanted to hurt Ron a bit, but ultimately he realized, it was okay.

'Ron,' said Harry slowly.

Ron looked at his best mate and all that they wanted to say suddenly didn't need to be said. And in the next instant it became a bit uncomfortable and Ron coughed and Harry clapped him on the shoulder and stood up and mumbled something about getting breakfast, and Ron mumbled his agreement. Harry pulled on his shoes and robes; Ron put on his own robes and picked up his school bag.

'Harry,' said Ron. 'Uh, thanks for, you know, the stuff...about Hermione. I figured you'd understand. About, you know.'

‘Yeah, you could say that,’ said Harry, grinning as he picked up his own school bag.

Another long silence.

‘So, Hermione wears lace bras?’

Ron smacked him in the face with another pillow.

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Hermione sent an owl to Neville's grandmother that day. A day after that she received a note from Neville's grandmother telling Hermione that after an extensive search of the library's genealogical charts and archives, they were unable to find the chart Hermione requested.

‘Dammit!’ said Hermione angrily. They were sitting at breakfast

‘I think I'm rubbing off on you, 'Mione,’ said Ron. ‘That's got to be the fifteenth time you've said a swear word in as many days.’

‘Well, I'm frustrated!’ said Hermione impatiently.

‘Why don't we ask Dumbledore what to do?’ Ron suggested. ‘We have to tell him about this anyway. We might as well see if he can give us some advice about it. I mean, what if this girl doesn't know she's descended from Morgan Le Fey at all? I dunno half the stuff about my ancestors. For all I know I could be related to Nearly Headless Nick.’

‘Assuming it's a student and not a professor,’ Harry said.

‘McGonagall would have found out if it were a teacher,’ said Hermione firmly.

‘And I'm sure she would have told us, or me anyway.’

‘Why, because you're her favourite student?’ said Ron.

‘That’s exactly why,’ said Harry. ‘McGonagall gave her that time-turner thing, remember?’

‘Be that as it may,’ said Hermione, ‘the book calls to the owner. She'd have to know. If the book is lost, it seeks out its owner by calling to her somehow--I don't know how--and she's supposed to go and look for it until she finds it.’

‘Maybe the book isn't lost at all,’ Harry said. ‘For all we know this descendant has had the book all along. Maybe she's keeping it a secret because it's so powerful or something. If the book has all this powerful magic that can wipe out everyone and she's the only one who can make the spells work, she might not want to go around blabbing to everyone about who she is.’

‘Or she doesn't have it, but she's looking for it herself,’ said Ron. ‘I mean, Voldemort is sure the book is here but he doesn't really KNOW it's here, does he?’

Harry let out a frustrated sigh and set down his spoon; his porridge was now cold. ‘We're operating on the assumption that Voldemort didn't trick me, remember? For all we know he planted the idea about the book in my head to throw us off, send us on a wild goose chase or something.’

‘No,’ said Hermione firmly. ‘That book accomplishes exactly what he wants to accomplish. He might have let you know about it on purpose, Harry, but I really don't think he was lying.’

‘We don't even know the book exists, Hermione,’ said Harry dispiritedly. ‘Maybe it's lost forever. Maybe it got burned or destroyed somehow. Maybe Elaine's daughter got rid of it. We have a lot of assumptions but no proof of what he's doing. We could be completely wrong about this.’

They sat in silence, not eating. The mystery surrounding Voldemort's plans had only two days ago seemed as good as solved. Now everything felt uncertain. Maybe Voldemort wasn't planning on using a disease at all, Ron thought. Maybe he'd found a whole continent worth of giants and he was going to set them loose on the Muggles and literally crush them.

‘Ron's right, though,’ Hermione said finally. ‘We should tell Dumbledore, even if it is just speculation. He's going to want to know about it, and we promised him.’

‘This is stupid,’ said Harry darkly. ‘You know, there's a perfectly simple way for me to find out what Voldemort's doing but Dumbledore won't let me do it.’

‘Legilimency,’ said Ron.

‘Yeah,’ said Harry.

‘You could ask Dumbledore,’ said Hermione. ‘He said he'd let you do it, you know, in his presence.’

‘I don't know if I can,’ said Harry. ‘Every time in the past I've been alone. That's what I'm used to. When I'm alone I feel like I can really clear my head and do what I have to do. With Dumbledore there...’

‘Dumbledore wouldn't interfere, Harry,’ said Hermione.

‘That's not what I mean,’ said Harry. ‘Look, I didn't tell you this but...last year? When I had that vision of the snake attacking Ron's dad, well, when we were in Dumbledore's office, when I looked at him, I felt like attacking him. That was Voldemort, see. He was inside my head and he made me want to attack Dumbledore. If I try to do Legilimency in front of Dumbledore Voldemort could find out and...and I might hurt Dumbledore.’

Ron ran a hand through his hair. ‘Whatever we decide to do, we can't deal with it now. We've got Transfiguration in five minutes.’

‘Let's just tell McGonagall after class, shall we?’ said Harry. ‘I feel better about talking to her anyway.’

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The spring Hogsmeade visit was on the same weekend as the Easter holidays this year. Ron, Hermione, and Harry were all looking forward to time away from school, even if for a day. Their homework had become so overwhelming that even Hermione, normally so prepared and confident in her work, had begun to panic. They pored through *The Daily Prophet* every morning looking for clues of any progress in Voldemort's plan, but so far nothing had happened. The tension became nearly unbearable amongst the three of them. Hermione, who'd always been high-strung, was particularly, tightly wound, and the two of them wound up having a blazing row just two days before the Hogsmeade visit, over what seemed like nothing at all. It was their first fight since becoming a couple.

They didn't speak to one another for two days, and it was the worst two days of Ron's life.

The only consolation was that he could spend more time with Harry. Except that Harry's mood was no better. He angrily reported to Ron that he'd had his first row with Susan. Also, apparently, over nothing at all.

‘Women!’ said Harry furiously. ‘Bloody hell. It’s like they exist to drive blokes up a wall. They ought to have a bloody course on how to figure them out.’

‘I’ll say,’ said Ron bitterly. ‘Bugger this. Let’s go for a fly, yeah? Before lessons.’

‘Excellent,’ said Harry, and they took their brooms and headed outdoors for a quick fly before breakfast. It took their minds off their girl problems for a while, but then Ron saw Hermione leaving the Great Hall just after breakfast and his mood went sour again.

He wasn’t sure what was worse, being angry with her, having her be angry with him, or feeling the powerful emptiness of not spending time with her. For a day and a half he resisted the almost overwhelming urge to apologize to her, mostly out of pride, but in part because he couldn’t remember who’d started the fight in the first place. He rebelled against the notion of apologizing over something he wasn’t sure he’d caused. But by the end of the second day of not speaking to her, Ron was so miserable that he awoke early on the morning of the Hogsmeade visit and waited for her to come down to breakfast, ready to apologize. The moment he saw her coming down the girls’ staircase he leapt up from his chair by the fireplace and strode resolutely over to her.

‘Ron,’ she said, annoyed. ‘What do you--’

‘Hermione, I’m sorry,’ he said firmly. ‘I don’t know why we fought and I don’t care but whatever I did I’m sorry and I hope you forgive me and can we please not fight anymore because I miss you like hell.’

She stared at him for a long moment, her mouth slightly open, before she spoke.

‘Don’t swear,’ she said softly, and she smiled even as her eyes filled with tears.

‘So...so are you my girlfriend again?’ he said hopefully.

‘Of course I’m your girlfriend!’ she said, and she threw her arms around him so hard he almost fell over. ‘Oh, Ron!’

She began to sob into his shoulder.

‘Wha--Hermione, don’t CRY!’ he said, holding her close and stroking her hair.

She pulled back and gave him a playful swat on the arm. ‘They’re happy tears, silly!’

Ron smiled and shook his head. ‘Girls. You’re like hosepipes or something.’

‘Shut up,’ she said, sniffing. He wiped the tears from her cheeks and kissed her softly, and then harder. It went on for a minute or two.

‘Get a room, you two,’ said Harry, as he headed down the boys’ staircase.

Ron pulled away from Hermione’s lips and they both said, ‘Shut up, Harry.’

The three of them headed out into the corridor and saw Susan coming from the opposite direction. Judging by the way she ran up to Harry and hugged him tightly, they had made up as well. Ron took Hermione’s hand and on impulse he kissed it as they moved past Filch and out into the daylight.

The winter cold seemed to have vanished overnight. The heavy rains that had plagued the school all through March disappeared. The frosts melted and left behind was the scent of sun-warmed grass. The village was beautifully turned out for the spring season; shops were festooned with bright spring flowers and the whole place had the smell of sweets and springtime.

Ron and Hermione got coffees at Madam Puddifoot's, a luridly decorated tea shop that, Hermione said, was the tackiest place she'd ever seen but served the best coffee she'd ever had. Ron had to agree with her. The place was entirely covered in lace and bright colours. The chairs had lurid pink buntings on them and little cherubs wearing

bunny ears were floating above the tables, sprinkling pastel confetti onto patrons. Harry and Susan had gone somewhere else; Ron guessed that Harry was none too keen to return to the place where he'd had his disastrous first-and only-date with Cho Chang.

After that Ron and Hermione went to the various shops, looking at quills in Scrivenshaft's, at Quidditch supplies (Ron could have spent the day in the shop had Hermione not forcibly yanked him back outside), picking out sweets from Honeydukes, and finally settling down for a butterbeer at the Three Broomsticks. It was wonderful not to have to baby-sit third years and just be with Hermione. They chose a small table in a corner of the pub and Hermione moved her chair next to his so that they could, in her words, 'be closer to one another.' They sipped their butterbeers and held hands and Hermione leaned her head on his shoulder on and off and occasionally kissed him on the cheek. She even let him get away with putting a hand on her knee, and Ron was only too happy to do it, but after a few minutes it became difficult for Ron to simply let his hand rest on that soft skin.

'Ron,' said Hermione sharply, when his hand began to wander just a bit higher than her knee.

'Sorry,' he said, and he tore his hand away and put it on the table.

'You can put it there, just don't move it,' she said.

'If I put it there I won't NOT be able to move it,' said Ron.

'Oh,' said Hermione, and she blushed, but she smiled a little, too.

Harry and Susan showed up at the pub and joined them for a while. They had a nice time laughing and joking; Harry had a kind of warm smile on his face the entire time and he never let go of Susan's hand. They drank another round of butterbeers and talked some more, when Neville saw them, waved, and came over to the table.

'Hi!' he said. 'Oh, no! Hermione, I was supposed to owl my grandmother for you! I forgot!'

'It's all right, Neville,' said Hermione quickly, suppressing a smile. 'I...got what I needed already. There's no need to worry about anything.'

Neville beamed and Ron pulled up a chair for him; soon enough they were a crowd of five and Neville was guzzling his own mug of butterbeer.

'Isn't that Eddie Carmichael?' Susan asked suddenly, looking up toward the entrance to the pub.

They all looked up and saw the Head Boy entering the pub. He was with a group of girls, all of them Ravenclaws, and he was holding court like some sultan with his own harem. Ron scowled. Padma Patil, Cho Chang and Marietta Edgecombe all hovered round him, giggling ridiculously. A fourth girl came in behind them, hanging on every word but clearly being a bit shut out of the group by the other girls. Eddie, however, was frequently bestowing upon the straggling girl one of his dazzlingly smarmy smiles.

Ron gaped. The fourth girl was Luna Lovegood.

'What the-hell's with Luna!' Ron hissed. 'What the bloody hell's he doing with her?'

'He's not "with" Luna, Ron,' said Hermione.

'No, he's with his latest passel of groupies,' said Harry, rolling his eyes. He pointedly did not look at Cho, and gave Susan's hand a little squeeze.

'He's being friendly enough to Luna, though,' said Neville, and he had a rather sad look on his face. 'She's eating it up. Do girls always go for jerks, or is it just me?'

'Neville, you...you like Luna, don't you?' said Hermione gently.

Neville went scarlet. 'Well, yeah, I guess. We get along okay. She's nice.'

'He's holding her hand!' Ron hissed. 'What the hell?' Indeed, Eddie had taken Luna's hand for a moment. The other girls glared at her as he fawned over her, but quickly enough he turned back to them.

'Ron, don't stare!' said Hermione. Then she elbowed Ron and glanced at Neville, who was moping into his butterbeer.

‘Sorry,’ said Ron. ‘Well, you’re way better than Eddie, Neville.’

‘That’s right,’ said Hermione.

Neville gave them a weak smile.

‘I don’t like this,’ said Ron. ‘Maybe we should warn her about him. I mean, Luna’s, well, she’s different, yeah, but she’s a nice girl. Eddie’s a slime.’

‘I’ll say,’ said Susan. ‘I don’t know what anyone sees in him. I mean, once you get past his looks he’s really slimy, isn’t he?’

‘You think he’s good looking?’ said Harry sharply.

‘No,’ said Susan at once, and she kissed him on the cheek.

‘Ron’s right, though, Neville,’ said Harry. ‘It’s Luna’s loss.’

‘Thanks,’ said Neville miserably. ‘I don’t have much luck with girls but Luna and me were starting to get along really well. She is a bit strange, but...Well, who can compete with Eddie, anyway?’

‘Lots of boys can,’ said Hermione firmly, and as she smiled at Neville warmly, she gripped Ron’s hand under the table.

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With the completion of the Easter holidays, the students, especially the fifth and seventh years, found themselves rudely thrust back into studying. Ron and Hermione were called upon to arrange, organize and oversee study times.

The fifth years were gradually descending into alternate states of panic. Ginny was one of the few students who seemed positively blithe about the whole business of O.W.Ls. Despite several letters from her mother and the usual lectures from the teachers about the importance of O.W.Ls to future careers, Ginny didn’t seem to be

too concerned about taking the exams.

'But if you want to do something with yourself after school--' Hermione began.

'That's over two years off,' said Ginny. 'And anyway, if I don't do great on my O.W.Ls I can always work at Fred and George's joke shop. They do great business and I have a few ideas of my own for inventions.'

Hermione pursed her lips and said nothing but Ron--who thought the idea of Ginny working in the joke shop was just as good as any other career--knew that Hermione only marginally approved of Fred and George's business.

Harry, Ron and Hermione's own exams did not promise to be significantly less rigorous than the O.W.Ls, according to their teachers. Hermione insisted that they all start preparing for their finals at once. Ron and Harry groaned but didn't argue, and Susan decided to join them in their study sessions.

The research they were doing toward finding the descendant of Morgan Le Fey had ground to a halt. Without any accurate genealogy charts, and thanks to the strict veil of secrecy they were operating under, they were at a loss as to how to proceed. And nothing seemed to be happening on Voldemort's end. No attacks had been attempted on the school--surprising, considering how certain Voldemort had been about the book being held there. Harry had not used Legilimency to find out anything further, not wanting to disobey Dumbledore but also not wanting to use it in Dumbledore's presence. *The Daily Prophet* had not reported anything unusual in weeks. Ron, Harry, Hermione and now Susan seemed to be the only ones--apart from the teachers, of course--who spent every day in a state of worry, waiting for the other shoe to drop at any moment, for something terrible to happen.

Harry was holding Quidditch practices three times a week; he had stopped working with Bill on Occlumency and Legilimency based on Dumbledore's order not to practice it anywhere except in front of him. Bill continued to drill the rest of the class on Occlumency, however, to Ron's annoyance. It was not fun at all; Ron felt like he had gotten better at it, at least in terms of clearing his mind and repelling Bill's efforts to read his thoughts, but it always took Ron a few seconds to really resist it; who knew what sort of thoughts he was letting slip in those few seconds? Bill never said anything to Ron, but by now he was quite sure Bill had a pretty good idea of Ron's deepest, most private thoughts about Hermione. Most of those thoughts involved Hermione wearing nothing but her knickers. Or less. Not that he'd seen her in just her knickers, but at least they had progressed past the Under the Shirt Bra On stage to the Under the Shirt Bra Off stage.

Hermione seemed to have mastered Occlumency easily, on the other hand. Ron wasn't sure he was happy about this or not. On the one hand he was rather curious to know Hermione's own most private thoughts about him. On the other hand, he thought perhaps it was better not to know.

Ron, Hermione, Susan and Harry were the Charms classroom one evening, having been given permission by Professor Flitwick to use it for practice. They were working on Disillusionment Charms, a type of Charm that made a person take on the appearance of his or her surroundings, so that he or she looked like a human chameleon. Ron had managed to make Hermione turn a rather lurid shade of purple with his Charm, so that she matched Flitwick's seat cushions, but nothing else.

'You're not tapping me on the head hard enough,' Hermione said patiently, tapping herself on the head sharply with her wand so that she reappeared normally.

'I don't want to knock you out, Hermione,' Ron said nervously, not really liking the idea of bopping his girlfriend on the head with his wand.

'You won't,' said Hermione. 'I promise.'

'All right then,' said Ron dubiously. He stood in front of Hermione and took a deep breath, then tapped her sharply on the head with his wand and shouted '*Disillusion.*' The Charm worked, but Hermione sank to the floor in a heap.

'Hermione!' Ron shouted. Harry and Susan turned around to see Ron kneeling by a perfectly Disillusioned Hermione, who was lying on the floor.

Suddenly there was a giggle. Hermione sat up, tapped her head with her wand, and reappeared, laughing.

'That wasn't funny,' said Ron grumpily. But he felt his face struggling not to smile.

'Sorry,' said Hermione. 'I couldn't resist. But you did it! The Charm was perfect.'

'Yeah, it was, wasn't it,' said Ron proudly. He started to say something else, but suddenly there was a commotion outside the classroom.

'What's that?' Harry asked, his wand raised over Susan's head.

'Let's check it out,' said Ron, holding out his wand. He and Hermione were prefects, after all. If there was a fight going on in the hall...

The four of them emerged from the classroom to find Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode all surrounding Luna Lovegood, taunting her. Crabbe had taken Luna's bag from her and had dumped the entire contents onto the floor, kicking books, quills and parchment rolls every which way. For a moment, Ron, Harry, Hermione and Susan didn't move; they were too shocked to move.

'Luna loves Eddie!' Pansy was shrieking. 'HA! You think Eddie'd give you the time of day, LOONY?'

‘Eddie give any girl the time of day if she lets him get in her knickers,’ drawled Malfoy. Crabbe and Goyle laughed.

‘Oooh,’ said Millicent. ‘Is Loony Eddie’s little toy?’

Luna was pressed against the wall, looking scared, with tears running down her face.

Malfoy moved in close to Luna and sneered. ‘Is that it, Loony? Do you let him yank up your skirt and--‘

Something snapped inside Ron and he moved. Before Harry or the girls could restrain him, Ron pulled out his wand and closed the distance between himself and Malfoy and yanked the blond boy away from Luna. He slammed Malfoy into the wall and pointed his wand in Malfoy’s face.

‘Say that again, you piece of shite,’ said Ron furiously.

‘Ron!’ said Hermione, but she, too, had her wand out, as did Harry and Susan. The three of them pointed their wands at the other Slytherins.

‘Bugger off, Weasel,’ Malfoy snapped.

‘You think you’re so high and mighty,’ said Ron furiously, but his voice was low and threatening. ‘You’re just a pathetic loser. Does it make you feel like a big man to pick on a girl?’

‘You would know,’ said Malfoy, ‘seeing as I pick on you constantly.’

Ron snarled and started to make a move but this time Hermione grabbed his arm.

‘Ron,’ she said warningly.

Malfoy sneered again, but Ron backed off, still holding his wand up.

‘I thought you were stuffing Granger, Weasel-king,’ said Malfoy. ‘But you’re awfully quick to rush to the defence of Loony, here.’

Hermione visibly stiffened and Ron’s knuckles turned white as he clenched his wand in his fist, but they didn’t move.

‘Leave Luna alone,’ said Harry angrily.

‘Oh. And what do you propose to do about it, Potty?’ Malfoy said.

Ron opened his mouth to retort but Hermione beat him to it.

‘In case you forgot, you disgusting little ferret, Ron and I are prefects,’ she said.

‘So?’ said Malfoy. ‘So are Pansy and me, Mudblood.’

Ron snarled again but Hermione held him back.

‘Yes,’ she continued, ‘but you and Cow Parkinson have just been caught abusing your position.’

‘What did you call me, you filthy--’ Pansy began.

‘She called you a cow,’ said Susan loudly, ‘but I’d say that’s an insult to cows.’

‘Looks like we’ll have to report you to Professor Dumbledore,’ said Ron, taking up

the theme. 'He might have to take away your prefect's badge there, Ratboy.'

'Go ahead and try, Weasel,' Malfoy hissed, reaching into his robes. Crabbe, Goyle, Pansy and Millicent all followed suit. But Hermione, Susan and Harry already had their wands out and pointed them again at the Slytherins.

'Magic in the hallways isn't allowed, Weasel,' Malfoy growled. 'Except in self-defence.'

'Then we'll just have to say we were defending ourselves, won't we,' Hermione said darkly.

'You really are pathetic,' said Harry. 'And predictable. It takes five of you to pick on a girl, does it?'

Malfoy made a hissing noise and started to reach into his robes again.

'Don't even think about it,' Susan snapped. 'Unless you like being turned into a slug again.'

'Clear off, Ratboy,' Ron snapped. 'And take your other little slugs with you. If I catch you bothering Luna or anyone else again, consider yourself reported.'

Malfoy glared at the four of them, then at Luna, who had moved away from the wall and was standing next to Susan, her own wand now out. Her look of fear had been replaced by one of defiance, though her wand hand shook just a little.

'You really think you're going to win, do you?' said Malfoy viciously. 'You think Potty here is going to save the day, do you? You're wrong. You've been on the wrong side from the beginning. The Dark Lord is coming and it's only a matter of time before the lot of you is dead. Starting with your Mudblood slag.'

Ron raised his wand but Hermione gripped his arm and gave him a look.

'Get out of here, Malfoy,' said Hermione, pointing her wand at his nose.

Malfoy said nothing but settled for giving them all a murderous look that was copied, in turn, by Pansy, Millicent, Crabbe and Goyle. The five of them stalked away toward the Slytherin common room.

'Gits,' said Ron furiously, putting his wand back into his pocket. He glanced at Hermione, who gave him a smile and took his hand.

'One of these days, 'Mione, you're going to let me hex the crap out of Malfoy,' he said.

'One of these days,' said Hermione. She and Ron turned to Luna.

'Are you okay, Luna?' Harry asked, putting a hand on her arm.

'Y-yes,' said Luna, her huge eyes filling with tears. 'Th-thanks.'

'Let's get your stuff back in your bag, shall we?' said Hermione kindly, and the five of them set to gathering up Luna's things, which by now had scattered very wildly all over the corridor.

Within a few minutes they managed to get Luna's bag repacked. She gave them a hearty, sniffling thanks.

'Let's get you back to your common room,' said Ron.

'Oh, I can get back myself--' she began.

'No,' said Harry. 'Ron's right. We'll take you.'

She nodded, and the five of them headed off in the direction of the Ravenclaw common room. Nobody said a word the entire way there, and Harry, Ron, Hermione and Susan all waited outside the entrance of the common room until they saw Luna disappear inside.

'I should get back," said Susan to Harry. 'I'll see you in the morning.'

'Wait, Sue, I don't want you going back alone, either,' said Harry. 'I'll walk you.'

'Then you'll be alone when you drop me off,' Susan pointed out.

'We'll all go,' said Ron. They doubled back and went past the Charms classroom, the four of them still silent. Ron held Hermione's hand, Harry held Susan's, and the four

of them still hand their wands out.

Just past the Charms classroom, Ron felt a light crunch beneath his feet.

He looked down and saw that he had stepped on a scroll.

'What's this?' he said, bending down to pick it up. Hermione looked at the outer edge of the scroll.

'It's Luna's,' said Hermione, noting the initials L.L. in the upper right corner of the rolled up parchment.

'We must have missed it when we were getting her stuff,' said Ron. Harry and Susan came next to him and looked at the scroll.

'Should we return it to her?' said Harry.

'It can wait until tomorrow,' said Hermione firmly. 'We need to get Susan back, and get back ourselves. Anyway, Luna's probably already in bed by now.'

'Okay,' said Ron. 'Wonder what it is?' He started to unroll the parchment.

'Ron, don't do that!' Hermione hissed. 'That's not your business.'

'What?' said Ron. 'It's not sealed or anything. It's probably just homework.'

Hermione rolled her eyes and let go of his hand, continuing after Harry and Susan. Ron looked at Harry, who shrugged, and he continued to unroll the parchment, feeling a small twinge of guilt that was squelched by his curiosity. He pulled the parchment open to its full size and gazed down at it for several moments as he walked, then felt his feet freeze in place.

'Whoa,' he said, his eyes widening into saucers.

'What?' said Harry, Susan and Hermione, stopping and turning to him.

'It's...it's Luna's family tree,' said Ron. 'Her genealogical chart.'

Hermione's eyes widened. In the next instant she swept over to Ron's left, Harry to Ron's right, with Susan just next to Harry, as they all looked down at the chart. For a few moments there was complete silence as they studied the chart. Then Hermione let out a gasp.

'Oh my god,' she whispered.

Chapter Twenty: Revelations

'No way,' said Harry, staring down at the chart.

'Blimey,' said Ron.

'Harry,' said Susan, but whatever she said next seemed to die on her lips as her own eyes gazed at the chart in awe.

Hermione looked up. 'We have to tell Dumbledore. Right now.'

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'Does anyone else know of this?'

Harry, Susan, Ron and Hermione were in Dumbledore's office, along with Professors McGonagall, Sprout and Flitwick. Bill was there as well. It was late and well past curfew by now.

Dumbledore addressed his question to the four teenagers but it was Harry who answered; Harry's eyes wouldn't meet Dumbledore's.

'Just the four of us,' said Harry.

'I see that you have decided to include Miss Bones in your efforts,' said Dumbledore, with a sigh in his voice.

Harry went scarlet. 'I'm sorry, sir, I just...I wanted to know if Susan was the person we were looking for.'

'Obviously she's not,' said Dumbledore coolly, gazing down at Susan through his half-moon spectacles.

‘Please, sir,’ said Susan timidly. ‘I...I haven’t said anything to anyone. I promise.’

Dumbledore gave a tired sigh at this revelation.

‘Harry, I understand that you are close with Miss Bones, but you must appreciate the danger of this information spreading around,’ he said.

‘I trust her,’ said Harry quickly, his voice a bit sharp, but he still did not look up at Dumbledore.

‘As do I. She is, after all, a Hufflepuff,’ said Dumbledore. And he gave Susan a kindly nod, and for a moment his eyes twinkled. Then he was serious again.

‘Miss Bones’ discretion is, however, not the issue,’ he said. ‘The issue is keeping this information close for the purposes of protecting the other students. You three are already in great danger for your knowledge. I would have preferred to protect Miss Bones.’

Ron and Harry exchanged a look; Harry's face was now full of guilt. He clearly hadn't thought that telling Susan might endanger her. He looked at Susan and his shoulders seemed to collapse.

‘I--I didn't mean to--’ Harry began, his throat struggling to form words.

‘I know you didn't, Harry,’ said Dumbledore kindly.

‘Please, Professor,’ Susan said, her voice a bit stronger, ‘I want to be involved. I want to help Harry. He’s...we’re...’ Her voice trailed off and she, too, blushed.

‘What’s done is done,’ said Dumbledore gently, holding up a hand. ‘And though I can’t say I’m pleased with this, on the other hand, it is good to know that Harry has another good friend in his corner.’ He gave Harry a small smile. Harry blinked and nodded, but went back to looking at his shoes.

‘The question now is whether to inform Miss Lovegood,’ Dumbledore went on.

‘Headmaster,’ said Flitwick slowly. ‘If I may. We don’t even know if this book exists. It’s entirely likely that Miss Lovegood doesn’t have it at all.’

‘The records of the book’s existence all show it disappearing after 1350,’ said McGonagall.

‘As Head of Ravenclaw House, I can say that I’ve never seen Miss Lovegood carrying anything but her schoolbooks,’ squeaked Flitwick. ‘Of course, it’s impossible to know everything about one’s students.’

‘It would be simpler, yes, if this book had in fact disappeared altogether,’ said Dumbledore. ‘Or been destroyed. I’m afraid, however, that this is not the case.’

‘How do you know, Albus?’ said McGonagall.

‘I know,’ said Dumbledore slowly, ‘because Miss Lovegood’s grandmother showed me the book.’

At this a collective gasp went up.

‘Albus...’ said McGonagall. ‘Good heavens. How...when?’

‘I was entrusted with the knowledge of the book’s existence by Siobhan Sheridan, Luna’s maternal grandmother,’ said Dumbledore. ‘I agreed to act as Siobhan’s Secret Keeper.’

Everyone stared at Dumbledore as this revelation seemed to fill the very air. There was a silence so absolute that Ron thought he could hear the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

‘Albus, you...you were under a Fidelius Charm--’ McGonagall began.

‘Yes,’ said Dumbledore. ‘But I’m afraid that, now, I must choose to break the charm and tell you all what I know. For it has become...a matter of life and death.’

He sighed and sat back in his chair.

‘The Book of Morgan Le Fey,’ he said, ‘is perhaps the most extraordinary, and most deadly creation in the entire magical world. For hundreds of years the book was passed down from daughter to daughter on the maternal side of Morgan’s bloodline, but it was only when the Squib, Elaine, received it, that the book was put into hiding. Elaine could not use the book, but she read it, and saw at once that, in the wrong hands, it could be used as a tool of tremendous evil.

‘Morgan had a brilliant mind, but she was the victim of many injustices in her life, and they embittered her, and she allowed her thirst for revenge to color many of her choices. Most of all, she wanted revenge on those people who had tried to suppress her magical abilities. She turned to the Dark Arts and became so skilled in them that were she alive today, she could, if she chose, destroy Voldemort with barely a second thought.

‘She started to put her book together when she was fairly young and kept it a fiercely guarded secret. Some of the magic she used to create it is so old, so ancient that most modern wizards and witches do not even know of its existence. She tied the book inextricably to her own female offspring, and their offspring, and so on; the book was bound by an ancient blood tie that could never be broken. No one but Morgan herself, or her direct female descendants, witches, could use the magic contained within the book. Anyone else who tried would die in the effort.

‘She was not, however, wholly evil. Mercurial and cunning and given to exacting awful vengeance on those who wronged her, but as she grew older her bitterness faded and she turned her considerable gifts toward the Healing Arts. It has been assumed that it was then that she added new spells to the book she had started, spells to counter the Dark ones she’d originally created. But in the end she could not resist the allure of her own abilities. She wanted the world to know of her skills. The book itself was a monument to her own power, and she was determined that only those she deemed worthy would be allowed to share in her power.’

Dumbledore paused, sighed, removed his glasses, and rubbed his eyes. He looked so old, Ron thought. When had he begun to look so very tired and old?

Dumbledore put his spectacles back on and continued.

‘By the time Elaine received it, the Black Plague had already devastated most of Europe,’ said Dumbledore. ‘There was chaos and death and while some believed that the Plague was a punishment sent down by a vengeful God, many others believed it was the work of witches and wizards. They couldn’t know then that the Plague was an accident of science and commerce, like so many other deadly diseases. Society wanted a scapegoat, and witches and wizards proved to be convenient ones.’

‘Elaine was already suspect because of her bloodline; she had made no secret of her origins because when she did so, she believed she had nothing to fear; it was long before the Plague came. She was a Squib, incapable of using magic at all. Unfortunately, once the Plague came, being a Squib didn’t save her from being arrested and burned at the stake.’

‘What did Elaine do with the book?’ said Hermione, her eyes wide. Ron was amazed she could speak; his own tongue was dry as he tried to absorb all this information.

‘She hid it,’ said Dumbledore. ‘No one is sure where or when, but before she was arrested she hid the book. However proud she was to be a descendant of the most powerful witch in the world, she understood, perhaps better than she knew, that the book was dangerous. She couldn’t possibly have known, being a Squib, that the book itself wasn’t meant to be hidden from its rightful owner.’

‘No one is sure when the book turned up next. I don’t know. It is not chronicled, so I, like anyone else, can only speculate. But whenever it turned up, I can only assume that its owners kept it a secret, perhaps because they understood how lethal it was, how lethal it could be in the wrong hands.’

‘As a result, knowledge of the book itself became limited. There is brief mention of it in your *History of Magic* textbooks, of course, but that text rather goes out of its way to make the book appear to be little more than legend.’

‘Unfortunately, that is not the case.’

He paused again, closed his eyes and placed his fingertips together before he continued.

‘I was entrusted with the knowledge of the book’s existence by Luna’s grandmother. It was right before she died, you see. She had become very ill--she died relatively young for a witch because of this. At the time, Voldemort was gaining strength, gathering his minions, and she knew if he found it, he would find some way of using it, if not through her, then through her daughter. Luna’s mother. Siobhan was determined to keep the book away from her daughter for fear for her safety. She herself had read the book but had never used it. She knew it was powerful, but she didn’t fully understand all its powers. She didn’t give it to me for safekeeping because she feared it might be dangerous to me; she only showed it to me once, and even then she did not allow me to read it.

‘She knew that the book’s connection to the descendant was powerful. She didn’t believe that merely hiding the book and using wards around it would be enough to keep her daughter from looking for it. The connection between book and owner is simply too strong. So she came to me and bound me with a Fidelius Charm. I would keep the secret and the book would become effectively invisible to anyone and everyone. Or so Siobhan thought. But she was wrong.

‘Her daughter found out about the book. The bond between the book and the owner overcame the Fidelius Charm and Lysandra Sheridan found the book. Even though I kept Siobhan’s secret, the book took hold of her daughter after she died, and Lysandra found it.

‘After Siobhan died I kept an eye on Lysandra, as best I could, in any event. By the time Lysandra finished Hogwarts the First War was in full force, and it was impossible for me to devote any time to protecting a single witch from getting her hands on a book that, in the end, belonged to her. Lysandra was a very powerful and capable witch and she was able to find the book with little trouble and penetrate the wards her mother had put on its hiding place. I didn’t learn that Lysandra had taken the book until I found out several years later from her husband, Linus Lovegood, that she’d died while trying to use it.’

Harry’s eyes snapped up and met Dumbledore’s, and Ron glanced at his best mate.

‘Yes, Harry?’ said Dumbledore.

Harry hesitated and glanced at his friends. He clearly didn’t want to talk about whatever was on his mind.

‘It’s all right, Harry,’ said Dumbledore. ‘Anything you say here is in the strictest confidence, and it’s likely that at least some of us know what it is, anyway.’

‘Luna...told me,’ said Harry. ‘About her mother. About how she died. She said her mum was doing a spell and it...went wrong on her. Luna saw it happen.’

Ron felt his stomach plummet.

‘Yes, that’s true,’ said Dumbledore slowly. ‘Luna’s mother was a very powerful and intelligent witch, but she was creative as well, and liked to experiment with spells. She must have found a spell in the book and tried to...alter it somehow. Linus came home one late spring day and found his nine-year-old daughter sitting in their living room, holding her dead mother’s hand. The book was open on the floor but Linus was naturally too distraught to pay attention to it.’

Ron’s stomach twisted in knots. All the guilt he’d ever felt about making fun of Luna began to eat at his insides. True, he’d never once said anything cruel to her face, and he’d been nicer to her since being a lousy date for her at the Halloween Ball, but how many times had he chuckled about her weird behaviour? How many times had he called her Loony Lovegood behind her back? And she had watched her own mother die.

Everyone in the room was stock still, waiting for Dumbledore to continue.

‘Linus tried to destroy the book,’ he said. ‘He tried, but he couldn’t. It became clear to him that just as only the book’s rightful owner could USE the book, thus only the book’s rightful owner could destroy it. He was terrified of letting Luna have it, so he asked me to take it and hide it. He was convinced that Luna was so traumatized by her

mother's death that she wouldn't want anything to do with the book. And Luna was nearly ten. In a year, she'd be going to Hogwarts. She'd be safe here.

'I took the book, and I hid it where Siobhan, Luna's grandmother, had put it. I put as many wards round it as I could think of. I had no idea if they'd work, but there was nothing else I could do. And that was the summer before Harry would start his first year at school. I knew that Voldemort was not really gone, and I also knew that he would devote his attention to finding Harry, because of the Lost Prophecy. Harry had defeated Voldemort as a baby for reasons Voldemort didn't understand, and I knew he wouldn't rest until he learned of those reasons and destroyed Harry. My attentions shifted to protecting Harry at any cost. Harry's life was paramount to everything.'

Dumbledore stopped again and looked at Harry, and for a long moment the two of them simply gazed at one another. Ron watched them both. The look in Dumbledore's eyes was incomparably, unbearably sad to Ron. The look on Harry's face was sad as well, but there was something else there. Ron didn't know what Dumbledore meant about a lost prophecy, or just why Harry was 'paramount to everything,' but the look on Harry's face told Ron that Harry did know. That he'd known for a while, and that he hadn't told Ron or Hermione. And judging from the confused look on Susan's face, Harry hadn't told her either. What secret was Harry keeping that he could tell NONE of them?

The old Headmaster cleared his throat and continued.

'I asked Professor Flitwick to keep an eye on Luna for me,' said Dumbledore. 'And he has been doing so these past five years of Luna's schooling. Unfortunately, none of us fully appreciated just how powerful a hold the book would have on her.'

'Please, sir,' said Hermione. 'Do you...do you think she has the book? With her?'

'It is all but a certainty,' said Dumbledore, and at this, he glanced at Bill. 'Perhaps Professor Weasley can apprise us of recent events. He has been informed by our contact, I understand.'

Ron stared at Bill. His older brother was in contact with...a contact? For the Order? Ron knew Bill was involved, but this was far deeper involvement than he ever expected.

Bill stood up, glanced at Ron, cleared his throat, and spoke.

‘Two nights ago bands of Death Eaters hand-picked by the Dark Lord himself infiltrated several homes,’ he said. ‘Pure-blood homes. One of the homes was the Lovegood house.’

Another gasp, and Ron felt slightly sick.

‘Oh...god,’ said Hermione, and she grabbed Ron’s arm and he looked at her, then at Bill. Then at Susan, who had blanched.

‘Sue,’ said Harry, and he caught her as she sank against him. Then he turned to Ron.

‘Bill...’ said Ron, and in that moment he honestly thought he might faint.

‘Not yours, Ron,’ said Dumbledore quickly. ‘Not yours. Your parents are safe, your brothers are all safe. And Miss Bones’s family is safe. Madam Bones has been staying at Headquarters in recent weeks, and your relatives, Susan, have been moved somewhere secret; the moment I learned that Voldemort was looking for the book, I put her on alert.’

Ron felt his knees buckle, but he managed to stay upright and nod weakly. For one horrible moment, one awful, heart-wrenching moment, his mind was filled with images of Death Eaters raining down on the Burrow, tearing it apart, attacking his parents...

He looked over at Susan, whose eyes were filled with tears. She was clutching at Harry and Harry had his arm around her shoulders. It was a decidedly intimate gesture

but nobody in the room made any objections. She was nodding and struggling to maintain her composure.

Ron closed his eyes and felt himself sway slightly.

‘Ron, it’s okay,’ said Bill. ‘Mum and Dad are fine, I talked to them this morning and again tonight.’

‘Yeah,’ said Ron. ‘Yeah.’ He nodded and felt the blood return to his hands, his feet. ‘But...why...why didn’t they...go after our family?’

‘Voldemort’s been doing his own genealogical research,’ said Bill darkly. ‘He...he, well, he must have thought maybe Mum--’

‘God,’ said Ron, and this time his knees did give out.

‘Ron!’ Hermione cried, and she and Harry and Bill all surrounded him and caught him, kept him from falling completely to the floor.

Some small part of his brain was aware that it was humiliating for him, a seventeen year old boy who stood a head taller than most people in the room, to go into a kind of half-swoon. That he ought to be stronger, more manly than this. But the rest of his brain was full of the idea of Voldemort going after his mother.

McGonagall swiftly pulled out her wand and conjured up a chair. ‘Sit here, Weasley,’ she said briskly.

‘It’s okay, Ron,’ said Bill firmly. ‘It’s all right. Mum’s fine, Voldemort’s not after her.’

Ron nodded. It was just like last year, when their dad was attacked by the snake. Except that it wasn't. Mrs. Weasley was fine. She hadn't been seriously injured in any attack. Voldemort wasn't after her.

She's okay, Ron told himself silently. She's okay. He's not after her. He's after...

'Are you okay, Ron?' said Hermione; she had knelt down beside him and was looking up at him.

'Fine,' said Ron, relieved that his voice had come back. 'I'm fine.'

'Are you sure, Ron--' Bill began, and he put a hand on Ron's shoulder.

'I said I'm fine,' said Ron sharply, now feeling stupid, embarrassed, weak. And selfish. HIS parents were fine. Voldemort wasn't after them. At least, not now. But Luna's father...

'Luna's dad,' said Ron, looking up at Dumbledore. 'What...what happened to Luna's dad?' Somehow it was nearly as bad, thinking about Luna losing her father, about Luna becoming an orphan.

'He's okay,' said Bill. 'Seems he was in Sweden investigating a possible lead for a story in his newspaper. He returned home yesterday morning to find his home torn apart. He'd missed the Death Eaters by a matter of hours. None of the other families were home, either, but their houses were pretty torn up, their lawns.'

The rest did not need to be said. Had Mr. Lovegood or anyone else been home when the Death Eaters came to their houses, they would have been tortured for information or murdered. Or both.

'How do you know this?' said Ron.

Bill looked at Dumbledore, who gave a nearly imperceptible shake of his head. 'I'm...not at liberty to say how I came about the information.'

Under any other circumstances, Ron would have argued, but his brain was so overwhelmed by all the information, and by guilt and horror and a million other things, that he could only look at his older brother and nod mutely. He still felt slightly sick. He felt stupid for having nearly fainted in front of all these people, in front of his girlfriend. He felt Hermione lay a comforting hand on his arm, but he jerked it away, not wanting her to touch him just now. He gave her a look and she bit her lip and looked away before standing up.

'And...the book?' said McGonagall slowly.

'Was not on the grounds at the time,' said Dumbledore. 'It seems Linus...failed to mention to me that the book has not been in its secret hiding place for quite some time.'

'Might someone else have stolen it?' said Hermione. She wouldn't look at Ron now. He realized he must have hurt her feelings, but a small part of him bristled. Didn't she understand how stupid he felt? The last thing he wanted was anyone fussing over him, least of all his girlfriend.

Dumbledore smiled at Hermione. 'I do not see how, Miss Granger. I may be an old man, but I do know a bit about creating wards, and I cast a fine Concealment Charm, if I do say so myself.'

Hermione blushed scarlet. 'Forgive me, sir, of course, I didn't mean--'

'I know,' said Dumbledore kindly. 'No, it appears that the only person who could have possibly penetrated the wards around the book had to be Miss Lovegood. I clearly underestimated the connection she has with the book. It can only have grown stronger as she has grown older. And the book itself...did not wish to stay hidden forever.'

‘Why would Luna want the book at all?’ said Susan hesitantly. ‘I mean, the book is...is the reason her mother died. Why...would she want to keep it?’

‘The book contains within it magic that even I in all my years do not fully comprehend,’ said Dumbledore. ‘To be honest, I don’t think any of us here is meant to comprehend it. The book’s magic takes hold of its owner and will not let go until the owner dies. The owner herself might choose never to use the book, but thus far, and quite obviously, no witch who’s ever had the book in her possession has been driven to destroy it. Even Elaine, even Siobhan Sheridan, who both knew the dangers of the book, would not destroy it, though it was in their power to do so. I can only surmise that the book, or its powers, insinuate itself into the owner in some way, so that she feels so bound to the book that she cannot bring herself to destroy it.’

‘So it...enchants the owner?’ said Hermione slowly.

‘Not exactly,’ said Dumbledore. ‘It does not control the day to day actions of the owner, as we have seen. Luna’s behavior is, while admittedly unusual on occasion, not at all out of the realm of average teenage behavior. She is a good student. She stays out of trouble. But the book’s hold on her was such that she penetrated the wards I created. At risk of sounding immodest, it’s not every day that a fifteen year old student witch can break through wards created by an old wizard such as myself.’

‘Sir?’ said Harry. ‘Why would Mr. Lovegood not have told you about Luna taking the book ages ago? And...and we’ve been reading *The Daily Prophet* every day, and there was nothing yesterday or today about a Death Eater attack on Mr. Lovegood’s house.’

‘That was my doing,’ said Dumbledore. ‘Linus contacted me the moment he came home. And I’ve been in touch with the few other families whose homes were attacked. It is a miracle that no one was home when the Death Eaters came. All of the families--and there were not all that many--are those close to the Order. Voldemort may not know of the existence of the Order but he knows which families are his enemies. He’s narrowed down his...field of suspects, as it were. In speaking with members of the families, it was agreed that it was vital to keep the entire matter under wraps. He repaired the damage to his home and I made contact with a small number of trusted fellows at the Ministry. Unless the Death Eaters decide to broadcast what they did--which I doubt, as they are operating in secrecy as much as we are--then as far as the general public is concerned, nothing whatsoever happened at the Lovegood house at all.’

‘My contact assures me the Death Eaters are operating under strict orders of silence,’ said Bill.

Ron glanced at his brother again, but didn’t bother asking just who this ‘contact’ was. He looked round the room at the professors for a moment, and something began to nag him in the back of his mind. But he was so exhausted, he couldn’t think of what it might be.

‘Very well, then,’ said Dumbledore. ‘We can assume that the events at the Lovegood house, and the other houses, will remain unreported. But, as I said, Voldemort has narrowed the field. Among the possible candidates, apart from Luna, there cannot be more than ten witches who might qualify to be Morgan Le Fey’s descendant.’

‘So...he doesn’t know about Luna,’ said Harry.

‘Not yet,’ said Dumbledore. ‘But it’s only a matter of time.’

‘Albus, why...why have you said nothing?’ said McGonagall. Dumbledore looked at her and smiled, but the smile did not reach his eyes.

‘You know why, Minerva,’ said Dumbledore. ‘You know why.’

They looked at one another for a long moment, and, at least from what Ron could tell, McGonagall seemed to understand what he meant.

Another heavy silence permeated the room. Ron came back to himself fully and stood up, pushing the chair away. He glanced at Hermione, but she wouldn’t look at him.

‘Sir,’ said Harry. ‘Why would Voldemort attack people’s houses if he knows the book is here? Isn’t it a waste of time?’

‘Ah, you noticed that, Harry,’ said Dumbledore approvingly. ‘The answer to that is simply that Voldemort is being more careful. He hasn’t made any attempts on the school because the school is perhaps the most protected place in all of Britain. And he has not attacked the school because...I am here.’

‘So...Luna’s safe then,’ said Ron.

‘No,’ said Dumbledore flatly. ‘Not one of us is safe, Mr. Weasley. Not completely. The school is well protected, the safest place to be, to be certain, but it is not impenetrable. There is always a way around even the strongest protection magic. Voldemort has not attacked the school because he wants to be absolutely sure he knows who the descendant is. He will try to take the book, and the descendant, in one fell swoop. It’s more...efficient that way.’

Ron nodded, and looked round the room again. Two years ago he would have begged to be included in the ‘inner circle’ of Order wizards and witches, deep in the thick of it, fighting Voldemort. But time and experience had changed Ron’s mind. He didn’t want any part of it. He hated this stupid war. He hated Voldemort for wanting to destroy all that was good in the world. He hated that his best mate was Voldemort’s chief target. Most of all he wished he were eleven again, and learning about the fun and the joys of magic and getting into trouble with Harry. At that moment, Ron would have given his right arm to face an army of mountain trolls or three-headed dogs or a dozen Whomping Willows if it meant that Voldemort would just disappear forever.

And as his eyes took in the people in the room, the little nagging buzz in the back of his brain clunked into place. Someone was absent from these proceedings.

‘Sir,’ said Ron. ‘Where’s Professor Snape?’

To a one, everyone else’s eyes snapped up sharply and settled on Ron. His eyes met Harry’s.

‘I’d like to know that too, sir,’ said Harry, not looking at Dumbledore.

‘I’m afraid I cannot divulge the reasons for Professor Snape’s absence at this meeting,’ said Dumbledore firmly. ‘His business with the Order is confidential.’

‘But sir--’ Harry began.

‘That is all I have to say, Harry,’ said Dumbledore firmly.

Another long moment of silence. Nobody spoke as Dumbledore removed his glasses again, and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He looked older and more tired than ever. Ron had never considered just how old the man must be, but ancient would be a more than appropriate word to describe the Headmaster’s appearance at that moment.

Dumbledore replaced his spectacles and looked up again.

‘I cannot emphasize,’ he said, his voice sounding just slightly weak, ‘how vital it is that tonight’s discussion is kept strictly among those of us here in this room.’ He cast another significant look at Harry.

‘Harry, you are not to use Legilimency,’ said Dumbledore. ‘Not any more. Do you understand? It is entirely too dangerous. He will try and get inside your mind again, make no mistake. But you are not to go seeking him out. The risks, at this point, far outweigh any potential benefit. This is for Miss Lovegood’s safety as much as for your own.’

‘What of Miss Lovegood?’ said Professor Flitwick, his normally squeaky voice low and grave. ‘Do we tell her of what we know?’

‘No,’ said Dumbledore at once. ‘If she learns that Voldemort is trying to get the book from her she might do something rash to protect it. She and the book are both safer this way. In the meantime we must continue outwardly as if we are not aware of what Voldemort is trying to do. The right people are backing us up on this; we have plenty of Aurors to handle the more dangerous aspects of our operation. But we cannot let Voldemort learn that we are on to him.’

‘But, Headmaster,’ said Bill, ‘Luna might have told someone about the book already.’

‘In that case,’ said Dumbledore, ‘I leave it to you to find out, in your Occlumency lessons, if that is indeed true.’

Bill held Dumbledore’s eyes for a moment, then nodded. Ron swallowed. Somehow, the idea that Bill might read Ron’s mind when Ron was thinking of Hermione in her knickers didn’t seem all that important anymore.

‘The four of you know to keep this under wraps,’ said Dumbledore, looking at Ron and the others. ‘I trust in your discretion. I must also ask that as of now, you stay out of this matter. As accomplished as you all are in your magical skills, you are still students. I do not wish a repeat of the events of last year.’

Harry looked down at his feet, his face a mask of shame. The four of them nodded silently.

‘This meeting is over,’ said Dumbledore. ‘For now, we keep quiet. If Voldemort becomes aware that we know his plans, he will change course, and we will have to start all over again. As it is, if he tries to come here, we’ll be ready for him, and we’ll have a better chance of stopping him.’

Ron looked at Harry, who was still staring at his shoes.

‘It’s an awful risk, Albus,’ said McGonagall fretfully.

Professor Sprout stepped forward. Ron noticed she was holding Susan’s hand. She hadn’t said a word up until now.

‘You’ve never been one to keep secrets like this before,’ she said.

Dumbledore smiled sadly and Ron saw him look right at Harry. That same sad look Ron had seen earlier in the old man's eyes came over him again.

'I wish I could say, Pomona, that you were right about that,' he said, and Ron noticed that Dumbledore's voice cracked just a bit.

## *Chapter Twenty-One: The Prophecy and The Bargain*

Ron, Hermione, Harry and Susan left Dumbledore's office in silence. The teachers stayed behind, presumably to talk more Order business with Dumbledore.

Harry clutched Susan's hand, but when Ron made to take Hermione's, she brushed him off. She was clearly upset at the brushing off he'd given her in the office.

Ron said nothing, but he followed Hermione, watching the movement of her hair as she walked. They were all headed for the Gryffindor common room; nobody said anything about Susan being among them. Ron wondered if she would wind up sleeping in Gryffindor Tower tonight.

Hermione reached the portrait of the fat lady first, and mumbled the password, and the portrait swung open. The four of them climbed inside to the common room, where the fire was still roaring. It was well past midnight.

Ron watched as Hermione moved to the sofa and sat down. She stared at the fire. Ron sat down next to her, but she moved away, just slightly. Still, Ron said nothing. He would not have it out with her in front of Susan and Harry, and by now they were occupying the two chairs next to the sofa.

For a long time no one said a word. Ron wondered why they all just sat there in silence, in the glow of the firelight. Didn't it make sense, if they weren't going to talk, just to go to bed?

But somehow, Ron didn't want to go to bed. Even if Hermione was upset with him, even if Susan and Harry wouldn't talk, Ron didn't want to be away from any of them. He didn't want to be alone.

It was Hermione who broke the silence.

'The book,' she said. 'The bond it has with the owner is more powerful than a Fidelius Charm.'

'But...I thought only the Secret Keeper could break a Fidelius Charm,' said Harry.

'Yes, but Luna's mother found the book,' said Hermione. 'Her mother tried to hide it from her and used a Fidelius Charm with Dumbledore, but it didn't work. I've never heard of that happening. It just isn't possible. But...but it happened.'

She sounded distinctly frustrated about this, Ron noticed, but he wasn't surprised. Hermione had long had difficulty dealing with things that stepped outside her logical, well-ordered world. Fidelius Charms were supposed to be unbreakable except by a Secret Keeper, but apparently *The Book of Morgan Le Fey* had such a powerful bond with its owner that not even that powerful, complex charm worked against it.

Nobody said anything for a moment as they tried to absorb what all the new information meant. It was Hermione, again, who spoke.

'Harry,' she said softly. 'What did Dumbledore mean about a lost prophecy?'

Harry's eyes snapped to her, and the question hung in the air like a lead weight. Susan sat up straight and fixed her gaze on Harry intently.

He swallowed. 'I--I don't want to talk about that.'

Hermione, as usual, did not back down. 'Dumbledore said keeping you safe was paramount above everything else. Everything else, Harry. Why?'

'Hermione, don't,' said Ron. Bloody hell. Why did she always have to push things?

'You don't understand,' said Harry, and he stood up and walked to the fire. Susan watched him but said nothing.

'You always say that,' said Hermione, and her voice grew tight with anger. 'But how do you KNOW we don't understand when you won't tell us?'

Harry said nothing, so Hermione went on.

'Last year,' she said, 'that crystal ball that had your name on it. The one in the Department of Mysteries. It had your name on it. Yours and Voldemort's. That's...that's why the Death Eaters attacked us. Isn't it?'

'Harry,' said Susan, and her eyes widened.

'Harry, you have to tell us,' Hermione persisted.

'ALL RIGHT!' Harry yelled. 'Do you want to know why those Death Eaters attacked us last year? Do you want to know why bloody Voldemort tried to kill me when I was a baby, after he'd murdered my mum and dad? Do you want to know why I didn't die when he aimed the Killing Curse at me? Do you want all the bloody, gory details, Hermione?'

'Harry, don't take it out on her,' said Susan sharply, as she stood up and gave him a stern look. 'You...you have to tell them.'

Ron and Hermione both stared at Susan.

‘You know...something about this?’ said Hermione weakly.

‘Sue, please,’ said Harry, and the anger in his eyes melting to a plea as he took Susan’s hands.

‘Harry, you have to tell them,’ she said. ‘They’re your best friends. You can’t keep doing all this by yourself, and I...I can’t help you on my own.’

There was another silence as Harry and Susan looked at one another. Then Harry looked at Ron, then at Hermione, and back at Susan, and he nodded.

Susan nodded back, squeezed his hands, and sat down again. Harry turned halfway to the fire and stared down at the floor.

‘The prophecy Dumbledore mentioned,’ said Harry. ‘It...it’s about me. Me and Voldemort.’ He paused, swallowed, seemed to be gathering his courage. ‘It said...it said that the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord would be born...at the end of July. And that the Dark Lord would mark him as his equal.’

At this Harry looked up, and he lifted the fringe of black hair back from his forehead to reveal his lightning-shaped scar.

‘This,’ he said. ‘That’s the mark Voldemort gave me. When I was a baby. When he tried to kill me.’

Ron blinked in confusion. Hermione shook her head.

‘I don’t understand,’ she said.

Harry lowered his hand and the fringe of his hair fell back over his scar. 'There was a prophecy about me before I was born. Voldemort heard about it, only...he didn't hear about all of it. He only heard the part about a boy being born at the end of July who could beat him. And that the parents of the boy defied him three times. My parents. So...he came after them. And me.'

Ron stared at Harry. 'Voldemort tried to kill you because...because it was...prophesied that you'd beat him?'

Harry nodded mutely.

'Blimey,' said Ron.

'But he didn't kill you,' said Hermione. 'He tried but he couldn't.'

Harry didn't speak for a moment. He looked at Susan, and she stood up again and took his hand. This gesture seemed to strengthen him somewhat, and he went on.

'He didn't hear the part about marking me as his equal,' said Harry. 'He didn't count on my mum...sacrificing her life for me. When she did that it...it created this protection for me. Dumbledore said it was ancient magic, and that Voldemort hadn't counted on that magic to protect me. So when Voldemort tried to kill me he...marked me instead. As his equal. And...and he transferred some of his powers...to me.'

Hermione gasped.

'That's why,' said Harry, 'I can speak Parseltongue. That's why I have visions. That's why he can get in my head, and I can get in his. That's why...that's why the Sorting Hat tried to put me in Slytherin.'

‘Oh!’ said Hermione, and Ron nearly fell out of his seat.

‘The Sorting Hat tried to put you in Slytherin?’ he said.

Harry nodded. ‘Don’t you get it?’ he said slowly. ‘I’m...like him. I mean, not completely. But we have similarities. Me and Voldemort. When I saw him as Tom Riddle in the Chamber of Secrets...bloody hell...I even look sort of like he used to look. And he was an orphan and he was brought up by Muggles and he was a half-blood. Just like me. Well, minus the orphanage part,’ he added bitterly, in a tone that suggested he might have preferred a Muggle orphanage to being raised by his horrid relatives.

Ron stared at Harry and his head hurt. He was exhausted but his brain was humming. So much new information to absorb in one night. He couldn’t remember ever feeling so...overloaded.

Hermione was looking at Harry with an expression of amazement and sorrow.

‘Oh, Harry,’ she said sadly. ‘Why didn’t you tell us sooner?’

Harry looked down at his feet. ‘I couldn’t,’ he said. ‘After what happened last year? After I nearly got us all killed, after Sirius--’

‘Don’t say that,’ said Ron forcefully. ‘You didn’t make us go with you.’

‘Harry, you can’t keep trying to protect us,’ said Hermione.

Harry nodded. ‘I...I know.’ He took a deep breath, then another. His lower lip trembled just slightly. He was trying not to cry.

‘Harry, tell them everything,’ said Susan softly, and she put a hand on his shoulder. He looked up and Ron felt a pang when he saw Harry’s eyes shiny with tears.

Harry swallowed hard again.

‘I’m the only one...who can defeat Voldemort for good,’ he said. ‘That’s what the prophecy said. It said I have...power the Dark Lord knows not. It said...it said neither can live while the other survives.’

The words hit Ron like a needle in his chest.

‘Does that...does that mean--’ he began.

‘It means,’ said Harry, ‘that in the end I have to kill him, or he’ll kill me.’

He turned away and stared into the fire and said nothing. Susan put a hand on his shoulder. Ron stared at the two of them in awe. He felt Hermione sit back on the sofa. It was an eternity before anyone spoke.

‘I...I should take Susan back,’ said Harry, looking up at her.

‘We’ll go with you,’ said Hermione at once, standing up quickly.

‘No,’ said Harry. ‘No.’ He wouldn’t look at Hermione.

‘But Harry--’ she protested, but stopped when Ron shushed her. She shot him a dirty look, but said nothing else.

‘I’ll be back,’ Harry said, taking Susan’s hand and making his way with her to the portrait hole. He paused for a moment and then added, ‘Don’t wait up for me.’ He looked at Ron.

Hermione opened her mouth to protest again, but Ron put a firm hand on her shoulder, and again she stopped, and again shot him a dirty look. The two of them watched Harry and Susan disappear through the portrait hole.

Hermione turned on Ron.

‘We shouldn’t have let him go,’ she said angrily. ‘He’ll be all alone after he drops her off.’

‘He’s not dropping her off,’ said Ron tiredly.

‘What are you talking about?’ she said testily.

‘Hermione, you heard what he said,’ said Ron. ‘He said not to wait up for him.’

‘I don’t--’ she began, and then her eyes widened, and she understood. ‘Oh.’

Ron felt more exhausted than he had in his life. He knew he should talk to Hermione, apologize for brushing her off before, in Dumbledore’s office. But he was just so tired.

‘I’m turning in,’ he said.

‘Ron,’ said Hermione sharply. ‘Wait.’

‘What?’ he said. ‘I’m bloody knackered, ‘Mione.’

‘So am I,’ said Hermione. ‘But you’re still going to tell me why you acted like a prat to me in Dumbledore’s office.’

Damn, he thought. She wasn’t going to let it lie tonight.

‘Look, I’m sorry,’ he said, throwing up his hands.

‘That’s not good enough, Ron,’ she said angrily, and she put her hands on her hips. ‘I was only trying to be helpful.’

‘Oh, is that what it was?’ said Ron, bristling. ‘Look, ‘Mione, no offence, but there are times when I wish you wouldn’t be such a bloody mother hen all over me, okay?’

‘I am NOT a--wait a minute,’ she said. ‘You’re embarrassed because...because you got upset in front of people, and because I tried to be...supportive. I don’t believe this!’

‘That’s not what it was!’ Ron lied.

‘Stop being such a boy about this,’ Hermione snapped.

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ said Ron.

‘You know, pretending you have to be tough and manly all the time,’ she said. ‘You and Harry are exactly the same. Pretending like you have to be tough all the time, like you can’t get upset or be scared or ask for help or...or look a little weak in front of someone--’

‘I AM SCARED!’ Ron yelled. ‘There! Are you happy now? I admit it! I’m bloody scared, Hermione. I just found out that my best mate has to kill the most evil Dark Wizard in the world, and that he’s trying to get his hands on a book that’ll help him wipe out half the earth. And I’m scared for my parents and my sister--god knows what he might try to do to Ginny, seeing as he’s already gotten to her once already. And I’m scared for you because you’re a Muggle-born and he’s going to go after you and I don’t know if--’

Ron broke off and felt his throat close. He turned away from her, ashamed of himself. Of his outburst. Of his own fear.

‘You don’t know what?’ said Hermione, but her tone was gentle.

Ron swallowed and felt a lump rising in his throat. He felt like crying. It was too much. All of it.

He wouldn’t cry. He wouldn’t look at her, because if he did he just might crack open.

‘I don’t know...’ he said slowly. ‘...I don’t know if...if I can protect them. Or you.’ He stared at the fire. He didn’t move.

She said nothing, but he felt her move next to him, felt her take his hand.

‘Look at me,’ she said softly. He wouldn’t.

‘Ron,’ she persisted. ‘Look at me.’

He did. His eyes burned.

‘Mione,’ he said, and his voice cracked a little. But then she put her arms around him and sank against his chest, and he felt his own arms wrap around her and pull her close. He held her tightly against him and they stayed like that for a long time, saying nothing. He didn’t cry; his throat hurt.

‘You’re too hard on yourself,’ she said eventually, her cheek leaning against his chest. ‘You don’t have to single-handedly protect everyone, Ron. We...we have to stick together. That’s all. That’s all.’

Ron took a deep breath and buried his face in her hair. ‘I just don’t know...if...if I’m enough.’

‘None of us is,’ said Hermione, looking up at him. ‘Not by ourselves. Harry’s not enough, either. He...he says he’s the only one who can destroy Voldemort but...but he can’t do it alone. Not really. That’s why...that’s why we stick with him, isn’t it?’

‘Actually, I thought we always stuck with Harry because we’re gluttons for punishment,’ Ron blurted, trying to lighten the mood.

Hermione laughed and gave him a playful swat on the arm, but then she buried her face against his chest again, and they said nothing else for a few minutes. The events of the night and the weight of everything he’d learned seemed to be a bit less burdensome, somehow. Ron felt his heart swell in his chest, and in that moment he wanted to tell her he loved her, because he just felt like he did, so much, right then. He hadn’t told her he loved her since the night they’d first kissed on the staircase, and she’d never once said it to him.

He was on the verge of saying it when she pulled away from him.

‘We should go to sleep, Ron,’ she said. ‘We’re both exhausted.’

‘Yeah,’ said Ron. ‘You’re right.’

She looked at him for a moment, her face full of shyness, and she tipped her lips up to meet his. They kissed softly for a moment, then pulled apart. Neither of them, it seemed, had the energy for anything more tonight.

‘Good night,’ she said, and she started toward the girl’s staircase.

‘Hermione,’ he called after her. He wanted to tell her again. Why couldn’t he say it?

‘Yes?’ she said.

‘Uh,’ he said dumbly. ‘I...I’m sorry. For being a boy.’

She looked at him for a moment, confused, and then laughed. ‘I’m glad you’re a boy, Ron,’ she said, and she headed up the staircase. He watched her go.

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Ron awoke the next day feeling groggy and out of sorts. He’d slept badly, his mind whirling with visions of Death Eater attacks. Of Luna Lovegood holding a big book and chanting wildly in some language he didn’t understand. Of Malfoy sneering at him and pointing at Hermione and saying ‘Mudblood’ over and over again. Of lightning shaped scars.

He sat up in bed and reluctantly pulled back the curtains of his four-poster. It was the weekend, and Seamus, Dean and Neville had all gone down for breakfast already. Ron looked over at Harry’s bed; the curtains were open and the bed had not been slept in. Which meant Harry had indeed been out all night.

As Ron started to pull the covers off him the door to the dormitory opened and Harry strode in.

He stopped when his eyes met Ron's.

'Oh,' he said. 'Uh, hey.'

He was still wearing his uniform and school robes. His hair was a mess, and he had circles beneath his eyes. But he had a somewhat contented look on his face.

'Where were you?' said Ron.

'With Susan,' said Harry, moving to his chest of drawers and pulling out fresh clothes. He started to pull off his robes.

'No kidding, with Susan,' said Ron, getting up. 'Where with Susan?'

'Just around,' he said.

'You, uh, feel...better this morning?' said Ron gingerly, trying hard not to study Harry too much.

'Yeah, a bit,' said Harry shortly, yanking off his school jumper and loosening his tie.

'Good,' said Ron, and he began to pull off his pyjamas and wrap his towel round his waist. For a moment, neither of them said anything.

'So what did you--' Ron began.

'We didn't have sex, okay?' said Harry.

Ron blushed and stared at his feet. 'I didn't ask.'

'You were about to,' said Harry pointedly, as he grabbed his own towel and pulled off his trousers.

'Sorry,' said Ron.

More silence.

'I'd tell you,' said Harry. 'You know. If I had.'

'Oh,' said Ron. 'Uh, I'd tell you, too. If I had. Which I haven't.'

'No?' said Harry.

'No,' said Ron.

'Well, me neither,' said Harry.

'You said that,' said Ron.

'No, I said I hadn't had sex last night,' said Harry, grinning. 'Not that I hadn't ever had sex.'

'You've had sex?!' said Ron, his eyes like saucers.

‘No!’ said Harry, laughing.

‘Shove off,’ said Ron, rolling his eyes. ‘Well, whatever you didn’t do it’s put you in a better mood today.’

‘I think you’re right,’ said Harry.

They said nothing for a long moment. The memories of last night’s many revelations came flooding back to Ron.

‘Listen, Harry, about...about that prophecy business--‘

‘I don’t want to talk about it,’ said Harry quickly.

‘I’m just saying,’ Ron persisted, ‘uh...I’m here. Okay. I’m...I’m around.’

Harry looked at him and nodded slowly. ‘Thanks, mate.’

Ron nodded back. ‘I’m just going to, uh, take a shower. See you downstairs, yeah?’

‘Sure,’ said Harry.

Ron showered and dressed quickly; it was late in the morning now and he didn’t want to miss breakfast. He met Hermione in the common room and they went down to the Great Hall together.

Ron was only a few minutes into his bacon and eggs when Harry appeared, accompanied by Susan.

‘Hi,’ she said, smiling tiredly at them. ‘Is everyone else as completely exhausted as I am?’

‘Hi, Susan,’ said Hermione. ‘And yes. I think we all look like something the cat dragged in.’

‘Speak for yourself,’ said Ron, elbowing her gently and grinning. ‘I look lovely this morning.’

Hermione rolled her eyes affectionately at him. But then he looked up and saw Luna Lovegood getting up from the Ravenclaw table. Next to her was none other than Eddie Carmichael. He was smiling at her and picking up her bag.

‘Ron, what--‘

‘Luna,’ said Ron. ‘And Eddie.’

They all turned carefully and watched as the Head Boy helped Luna pack her school bag. She looked distressed about something, but Ron couldn’t figure what it might be. Eddie was speaking to her and appeared to be trying to soothe her about something. She nodded and he handed her the bag and gave her one of his trademark smiles. She looked up at him with an expression that Ron thought was very close to adoration. Then she turned and headed out of the Great Hall.

At that moment, Eddie’s eyes fell on them. They all turned around quickly away from him. All except Ron, who couldn’t help but fix his eyes on the Head Boy. Eddie gave him a cool smile, and his dark eyes flashed. Ron smiled coolly back, and watched as the Head Boy sat down again and began to flirt with Marietta Edgecombe.

‘What was that about?’ said Hermione.

‘What?’ said Ron.

‘Your staring contest with Eddie,’ she said.

‘Oh, nothing,’ said Ron. ‘I just don’t trust him, that’s all.’

‘Big surprise there,’ said Harry, smirking.

‘He’s being awfully nice to Luna,’ Susan noted.

‘Yeah, well, much as I hate to credit Ferret Malfoy with being right about anything,’ said Ron, ‘that’s probably because Eddie thinks he can get in her knickers.’

‘Ron!’ said Hermione, scandalized. ‘Honestly.’

‘What?’ said Ron defensively. ‘Come on, ‘Mione, you’ve said so yourself. The guy’s a sleaze.’

‘I know,’ said Hermione, blushing. ‘You just...do you have to be so crude?’

Harry bit his lip; he looked like he was trying not to laugh.

‘Well, he’s a crude sort,’ said Ron loftily. ‘How else am I supposed to be about it?’

Hermione rolled her eyes again and swatted him playfully on the arm, and for another few minutes there was silence as they ate more breakfast. Ron was starving and piled his plate high a second time with bacon and eggs. His eyes moved about the Great Hall again, avoiding the Slytherin table, and moving up to the staff table. Hagrid was there and gave them all a wave. So were Professor Sprout, Professor Sinistra, Professor Vector, Professor Flitwick and Hagrid. Bill was there as well, engaging Flitwick in conversation. McGonagall and Dumbledore were nowhere to be seen. Nor was...

‘Hey,’ said Ron suddenly.

‘What?’ said Harry, Hermione and Susan.

‘Snape,’ said Ron. ‘He’s not here.’ And then he remembered something else. The thing that had been bothering him last night, while they were in Dumbledore’s office.

‘So?’ said Hermione. ‘Dumbledore’s not here, either.’

‘Snape wasn’t at the meeting last night, Hermione,’ said Ron.

Harry’s eyes widened, and then narrowed. ‘Funny thing, that,’ he said. ‘And remember how Bill said he got information from some contact?’

‘You’re saying Snape is the contact?’ said Hermione in hiss.

‘What do we know about what Snape does for the Order, anyway?’ said Susan. ‘Nobody’s ever told me.’

‘We dunno,’ said Ron. ‘He was always coming and going last year. I wonder--’

But then Hermione shushed him and gave him a look as Ginny came over and sat down.

‘Good morning,’ she said brightly, and then she noticed that all four of them were staring at their plates and not talking. ‘What?’

‘Nothing,’ said Ron sharply. ‘Just some school stuff. The four of us’ll go over it in the common room later, right?’ He gave Harry, Susan and Hermione a look, and they all understood his meaning.

‘Ron--’ Ginny began.

‘Never mind, Gin,’ said Ron. ‘Want some eggs?’ He picked up the huge platter of eggs and held it up for her.

She sighed. ‘All right, then.’

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In the common room that evening, Hermione pulled some chairs into the far corner of the room. It was such a fine day outside that even as dusk approached, the room was deserted. Ron looked longingly out at the clear sky and wanted very badly to take a fly on his broom, but then he remembered why he, Hermione, Harry and Susan were here in the first place. To talk about Snape. Or more accurately, the lack of Snape. They spoke in low voices and constantly lifted their eyes to watch for any approaching students.

‘So,’ said Harry, ‘Snape doesn’t show up at last night’s meeting, even though everything we learned is really important.’

‘And Bill said something about a contact,’ said Hermione. ‘Snape has to be the contact. Or, at least, that’s the most likely explanation as to why he wasn’t there.’

‘How do you figure?’ said Ron.

‘Well, he’s a spy for the Order, isn’t he?’ said Hermione.

‘A spy?’ said Ron, snorting. ‘Snape?’

‘Yes, Snape,’ said Hermione tightly. ‘Ron, he’s a former Death Eater, remember? Who better to act as a spy for the Order than him? He can get inside and learn things in a way that nobody else could.’

‘You’re assuming Snape has stopped working for Voldemort,’ said Harry. ‘I’m not so sure.’

‘Oh, Harry, we’ve been over that a million times--’ said Hermione.

‘Hermione, would it kill you to at least *consider* that Snape--a former Death Eater *and* the head of the house that’s produced more dark wizards and witches than any other, including Voldemort--just might be working both sides?’ said Harry gently.

‘Well,’ said Hermione, ‘I suppose I can...consider it.’

‘What about Eddie?’ said Ron.

‘What about him?’ said Hermione.

‘Why’s he being all nice to Luna?’ said Ron. ‘Bit weird, don’t you think?’

‘You were the one who said he’s nice to any girl he wants to...you know!’ said Hermione.

‘Yeah, I did,’ said Ron. ‘But, well, Luna doesn’t exactly strike me as his type. You know. It doesn’t fit.’

‘Oh,’ said Hermione, and she nodded. No, Luna hardly struck any of them as the sort of girl a handsome smooth-talker like Eddie would be interested in.

‘Yes, but,’ said Susan, ‘we’ve never seen them together. Alone, together, I mean. Maybe...maybe it’s just his usual flirtatiousness.’

‘Whatever it is, I don’t like it,’ said Ron. ‘How do we know she hasn’t blabbed to him about the book?’

‘We don’t,’ said Hermione. ‘That’s for Bill to find out, remember? He has to try and wrest it out of someone.’

‘And if he’s not going to come clean on his contact, he might not come clean on what he finds out,’ said Harry. ‘We’re not even supposed to be involved anymore, remember?’

‘Oh, bugger that,’ said Hermione. ‘We’re in way too deep now to quit.’

Ron and Harry stared at her.

‘What?’ she said.

‘Do you have to be so crude, Hermione?’ said Harry, grinning.

‘Yeah,’ said Ron. ‘Don’t swear.’

Susan giggled.

‘This is serious!’ Hermione hissed. ‘Look, we have to find out if Luna’s told anyone.’

‘How?’ said Ron. ‘We can’t just ask her. Harry’s right; Bill won’t tell us anything. Not without Dumbledore’s say so, anyway.’

‘She had to have told someone,’ said Susan. ‘I can’t imagine anyone being able to keep a thing like that secret forever.’

‘She’s managed to keep her identity as Morgan Le Fey’s descendant a secret,’ Hermione pointed out. ‘Nobody knew about that.’

‘There has to be a way we can find out if she’s told anyone,’ said Harry.

‘Who do you think she’d confide in, anyway?’ said Ron.

‘Well, she’s confided in me.’

At the sound of this fifth voice, Ron, Harry, Hermione and Susan shot up from their seats. Ginny stood in the centre of the common room. She was standing with one hand on her hip. In another hand Ron could see bits of flesh-coloured string peeking out between her fingers. None of them had even heard her come into the room, or come down the stairs.

‘Ginny!’ said Ron, in shock and fury. He could guess immediately what that flesh-coloured string signified. ‘Have you been listening all this time?’

‘Yep,’ said Ginny airily, and she opened her hand to reveal the Extendable Ear. ‘I love these--the most practical thing Fred and George have ever invented.’

‘Ginny, you shouldn’t be eavesdropping!’ Ron scolded, and in the next instant he was horrified to realize that he sounded remarkably like his mother.

‘How much did you hear?’ Harry demanded.

‘Everything,’ said Ginny. ‘I’ve known about what you’ve been up to for weeks.’

‘GINNY!’ Ron bellowed.

‘What?’ Ginny said, whirling on her brother. ‘I was bored, all right. Ever since Dean and I broke up--’

‘You and Dean broke up?’ Ron interrupted, unable to hide the satisfaction in his voice.

‘Thanks for your sympathies,’ Ginny said sarcastically. ‘Yes. It was almost two months ago.’

‘Two months--why didn’t you tell me?’ said Ron. He whirled on Hermione. ‘Did you know about this?’

‘No,’ said Hermione quickly. ‘Ginny didn’t tell me.’

‘No, I didn’t,’ said Ginny, sounding annoyed. ‘It wouldn’t be the first time you lot didn’t notice something about me.’

Nobody said anything to this. Ron couldn’t; it was true. He had ignored his sister, many times. One time he’d ignored her, she wound up possessed by Voldemort.

‘Sorry,’ he mumbled, ashamed of himself.

‘Forget it,’ said Ginny lightly.

‘No, you’re right, Gin,’ said Ron. ‘Look, I’m sorry about you and Dean. Really. Do you want me to pummel him for you?’

‘Ron, honestly,’ said Hermione, throwing up her hands.

‘Thanks for the offer, big brother,’ said Ginny, smirking, ‘but it was an amiable break up, so don’t go thinking about breaking his legs or anything. But as I said, since Dean and I broke up, I’ve been bored. Studying for O.W.L.s is driving me a bit mad and I needed something else to do so--’

‘So you’ve been using those damn things’--Ron indicated the Extendable Ear and remembered he was angry with his sister for being nosy-- ‘to spy on us?’

‘How the hell else am I supposed to know what you’re doing?’ Ginny snapped.

‘You’re not supposed to know anything!’ Ron shot back. ‘Dumbledore told us not to tell anyone--’

‘You’ve told Susan, haven’t you?’ Ginny retorted hotly. ‘You weren’t supposed to do that. And I have as much a right to know what you’re doing as she does. No, more so. I’m your sister. You-Know-Who nearly killed me after he possessed me for the better part of a year. I’m involved whether you like it or not. And before you go lecturing me that I’m too young or that it’s too dangerous for me to get involved, you should know that Luna told me ages ago about her ancestry and that book you four are so worked up about.’

‘Luna told you?’ Harry asked, stunned.

‘Why the bloody hell didn’t you tell us?’ Ron screeched.

‘You never asked,’ Ginny said smugly.

‘Did Luna tell you anything else?’ Ron demanded.

‘Maybe,’ said Ginny, her voice suddenly lackadaisical as she took a seat in front of the fire.

‘Maybe,’ said Ron. ‘What d’you mean, maybe? Are you going to tell us or what?’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Ginny, a wicked grin spreading across her face. ‘Of course, I can’t seem to recall anything just at the moment.’

‘Why you little--’ Ron began, half rising out of his chair.

‘Save it,’ said Ginny sharply. ‘Here’s the deal. I want in. If you want to find out about Luna, whether she’s told anyone about who she is or the book and where she’s keeping it--’

‘You know where the book is?’ Hermione squeaked.

Ginny went on as if Hermione hadn’t spoken. ‘--you let me in on what you’re planning to do.’

‘You want “in”?’ said Harry, looking appalled. ‘This isn’t a game, Ginny! We’re not playing a round of Exploding Snap!’

‘You can’t just come in here and tell us--’ Ron began indignantly.

‘Can’t I, Ron?’ Ginny said triumphantly. ‘The deal is I’m in. Or you can sit around helplessly and wait for Bill to find out stuff that he’ll never tell you. Or I just might let it slip to Bill that you four are still trying to involve yourselves in something Dumbledore told you to stay out of.’

Ron gaped at his younger sister. ‘How did you know about that? With an Extendable bloody Ear?’

‘I have lots of ways of finding out stuff,’ said Ginny, crossing her arms in front of her chest smugly.

Ron and Harry stared at her.

‘You can’t tell Dumbledore,’ said Harry.

‘I will,’ said Ginny, her eyes narrowed, ‘unless you let me in on this.’

‘That’s--that’s BLACKMAIL!’ Ron protested.

‘I prefer to think of it as creative bargaining,’ said Ginny loftily.

‘You’re worse than Fred and George, you are!’ said Ron in amazement.

Ginny gave him and Harry a bright smile. 'Really? Thanks! I take that as a compliment.' And Ron saw that she was serious.

'Bloody hell,' Ron said, putting his head in his hands. 'Harry!'

'I don't think we have much of a choice, mate,' said Harry. He was looking at Ginny as though deciding whether to be angry with her or to be impressed by her nerve. Susan hadn't said a word, but she, too, looked impressed.

'Oh, for--FINE!' said Ron angrily. 'You've got a deal, Gin. But when this is over you're in deep shite.'

## *Chapter Twenty Two: Conversations*

'All right, Ginny,' said Harry. 'Tell us what you know so far.'

She smiled a smug smile and sat down with them in front of the fire.

'Okay,' she said. 'Luna wrote me last summer and we started to be pretty good friends after that. It started because of what happened at the Ministry. And then she told me she had a mad crush on Ron--why, I'll never know--but she knew he fancied Hermione--'

'Get to the point, Ginny,' said Ron, rolling his eyes.

'So eventually Luna tells me she has this big secret and would I be interested in hearing about it,' said Ginny. 'I didn't really think anything of it at the time, because you know how she is--I thought her big secret would be that she's keeping a heliopath in her bedroom or something equally daft. But then she told me she was the direct descendant from Morgan Le Fey. That was before you lot started getting into whatever it is you're into, so at the time I didn't think anything of it. In fact, I didn't even really believe her at first.'

Ginny had said all of this very fast, and then took a deep breath.

‘But then Luna showed me her family tree,’ she said, ‘and that convinced me. Except that I didn’t see what the huge deal was, because most witches are descended from somebody famous, after all. Anyway, I didn’t think anything about it until I overheard you lot talking about that book and how you think Voldemort is going to kill Muggles using a deadly disease or something and how he was looking for the book--’

‘Bloody hell, you DO know everything,’ said Ron, groaning.

Ginny continued as if he hadn’t spoken. ‘--and I got curious. But then Dean and I broke up and even though it was friendly I wasn’t all that happy about it, either, so I didn’t think much about your stuff, until a week later when I was in the library reading my *History of Magic* textbook and I came across that passage about *The Book of Morgan Le Fey*. So the next night when I got together with Luna to study I sort of accidentally on purpose pulled out *History of Magic* and made a comment about “isn’t that interesting, *The Book of Morgan Le Fey*” or something to that effect. And Luna immediately launches into a whole bit about how the *History of Magic* textbook authors are dolts who are in some sort of denial and why can’t people just learn to acknowledge that heliopaths and Crumple Horned Snorkacks and *The Book of Morgan Le Fey* all do really exist. So I asked her how she knew all those things existed and I got to listen to another fifteen minutes of her telling me about Snorkack sightings and what and then she finally said something like “I know about the book because I have it.”’

Ginny took another deep breath and went on.

‘So I acted all impressed--well, okay, I WAS impressed, I wasn’t really acting--and I asked her if I could see it, and she said, sure, but that only I could see it, and I couldn’t tell anyone. I said okay, and later that night I went to her room and she showed me.’

Hermione gave a little squeak. ‘You’ve SEEN it?’

‘Yep,’ she said, grinning.

‘Well, tell us!’ said Ron impatiently. ‘What’s it look like? What’s in it? Did she show you any spells?’

‘To be honest it doesn’t look like much,’ said Ginny. ‘It’s just a big old leather book.’

‘Yes, yes, but did you see any of the spells?’ said Hermione.

‘Not really,’ said Ginny. ‘Luna was really protective over it. She wouldn’t even let me touch the book. She just showed it to me and flipped through the pages really fast. It almost looked like everything was written in a different language, too.’

‘Did she tell you anything else?’ said Harry.

‘Just that she’d never used any of the spells in the book, and that her mother had tried one of them, but that she’d modified it or something, and it backfired on her and she died,’ said Ginny.

Ron slumped back in his seat. ‘No offence, Ginny, but you’re not really telling us much that’s new. I mean, we knew most of this stuff already.’

‘I’m not done,’ said Ginny. ‘Luna’s afraid of the book. Really afraid. She told me she knew Voldemort would want it. I asked her, why don’t you just destroy it. She said she tried that already, over the Christmas holiday, while her father was away on some business trip, but she said that any Charm she tried to use on it wound up backfiring on her. She burned up her hands trying to use an Incendio Charm on it, and when she tried to rip out a page of the book it opened up a cut in her arm. She told me she’s been trying to come up with a way to destroy the book ever since, but that so far, she can’t find a way to do it without it killing her.’

‘But...but I thought the owner COULD destroy the book,’ said Hermione. ‘That’s what Dumbledore told us.’

‘He’s probably right, Hermione,’ said Ginny. ‘But you haven’t seen Luna like I have. She’s obsessed with the book. It’s got a hold on her. It’s...it’s sort of like what happened with me. And Tom Riddle’s diary. It’s like she knows the book is bad to

have around. She knows that if anyone else got a hold of it, it could be deadly. But the book won't let her go. She thinks Morgan's spirit is in that book. It's not like Morgan's trying to possess Luna and take over Luna's body--not like what Tom did with me. It's some sort of ancient magic, to do with a blood tie. But it's just as powerful, and that's why she can't seem to get rid of the book.'

Nobody said anything for a long moment. Ron watched his sister. She looked down at the floor and began to fidget with her hands.

'You called him Tom,' said Ron.

'What?' said Ginny.

'Just now,' said Ron. 'You called Voldemort "Tom".'

Ginny went scarlet, and the rest of them glanced at her, then at Ron, then back at her.

'Well,' said Ginny slowly, 'that's who he was to me for a whole year. I...I guess it just slipped out.'

Harry cleared his throat and said, 'Did Luna mention whether she'd told anyone else about the book?'

Ginny blinked and looked at Harry. 'No. As far as I know she hasn't told anyone but me. But...'

'What?' said Ron.

'Look, it's probably nothing, but I do know she has a crush on Eddie Carmichael,' said Ginny.

‘I knew it,’ said Ron at once. ‘I knew he had something to do with this.’

‘Ron, be sensible,’ said Hermione. ‘Luna has a crush on him, that doesn’t mean he has a crush on her. And it certainly doesn’t mean he even knows anything about the book at all.’

‘I’m telling you, something is not right about him,’ said Ron. ‘You didn’t see the look he gave me in the Great Hall when he was helping Luna with her books. Looked like a cat who just ate a canary.’

‘That’s not proof of anything,’ said Hermione.

‘To be honest,’ said Ginny, ‘I don’t think she’s told Eddie. I mean, when she told me it was like she was relieved that she was finally telling somebody, but if she told Eddie, wouldn’t he have to report it? He’s Head Boy and in her house and everything. Surely Dumbledore would have mentioned it at your meeting the other night.’

‘Unless Eddie’s working for the Death Eaters,’ said Ron at once.

‘Oh, Ron, really!’ said Hermione. ‘Eddie doesn’t have the Dark Mark, for heaven’s sake.’

‘That’s not proof of anything,’ said Ron, smirking. ‘Snape does have the Dark Mark on his arm and supposedly he’s a spy for the Order. Maybe Eddie’s a spy for the Death Eaters. Maybe Eddie doesn’t get his Dark Mark until he earns it by handing over *The Book of Morgan Le Fey* and her descendant.’

‘That seems awfully far-fetched,’ said Hermione.

‘No, it doesn’t,’ said Harry. ‘Look, Voldemort has to find a way into the school somehow, right? But we know he can’t just Apparate here and grab it.’

‘Wait, wait,’ said Hermione. ‘Say that again.’

‘What?’ said Harry. ‘The part about how Voldemort can’t Apparate into the school--’

‘Thank you,’ said Hermione. ‘That’s all I wanted to hear. That you’ve finally gotten it into your head that you can’t Apparate or Disapparate in and out of Hogwarts.’

‘Ha ha,’ said Harry. ‘The point is, Voldemort can’t just send one of his Death Eaters into the school to get the book. Well, he could, but it would be difficult. It’s a lot easier to have someone on the inside working for him.’

‘You mean Eddie?’ said Ron.

‘Eddie, Snape, Malfoy,’ said Harry. ‘Malfoy was picking on Luna the other day, and his father’s right up there in rank among the Death Eaters. Snape’s a spy for our side but he could be playing both ends against each other. Eddie’s a flirt but what if he’s been flirting with all those girls because he’s supposed to find out which one of them has the book?’

‘Well, there’s a dilemma,’ said Ron. ‘Trying to decide who’s most evil: Malfoy, Eddie or Snape.’

‘Bill would know,’ said Ginny. ‘Seeing as he’s supposed to use Legilimency on everyone to find out. He’s really good at it. Except that he’s not going to tell us, because we’re not supposed to be involved.’

‘Do you think you could find out from Luna whether she’s told Eddie?’ said Harry, addressing Ginny.

‘That shouldn’t be hard,’ said Ginny. ‘I’m meeting with her tomorrow for an O.W.L study group; I can take her aside after.’

‘That’ll tell us whether she’s told him but that doesn’t tell us whether Eddie’s evil or not,’ said Ron. ‘Damn. Too bad we don’t have any Polyjuice Potion lying around. Then we could find out about Eddie and Malfoy and Snape.’

‘We can still work on Eddie,’ said Ginny.

‘Oh yeah, how?’ said Ron.

‘In case you haven’t noticed, Ron, Eddie is a sucker for female attention,’ said Ginny coolly. ‘What if us girls just starting being a bit more friendly to him?’

Ron shot up off the sofa. ‘WHAT?!’

‘I knew he wouldn’t go for it,’ said Ginny, glancing at Hermione.

‘Damn right I’m not going for it!’ said Ron. ‘You really think I’m going to let my baby sister and my girlfriend flirt with that dirty great prat?’

‘I’m not a baby!’ Ginny snapped.

‘Excuse me,’ said Hermione huffily, ‘but I wasn’t aware that I had to ask your permission to do something, Ron.’

‘Wh-what--you mean you WANT to cozy up to Carmichael?’ said Ron, horrified.

‘No!’ said Hermione. ‘I’m just saying, desperate times call for desperate measures.’

‘Oh really?’ said Ron furiously. ‘And how desperate are we talking here? A bit of hand-holding? A snog in the library stacks?’

‘Oh, Ron, for heaven’s sakes, don’t get hysterical,’ said Hermione, rolling her eyes.

‘I AM NOT HYSTERICAL!’ Ron bellowed.

‘Maybe not, but you’re about to wake up the whole bloody castle,’ Harry muttered.

‘It’s just a bit of friendliness,’ said Susan.

‘Wait, wait, who said you’re going along with this?’ said Harry.

‘I did,’ said Susan. ‘You have a problem with that?’

‘Yeah, I do,’ said Harry. ‘Ron’s right. Eddie’s a dirty great prat, with the emphasis on dirty. I don’t like the way he looks at girls.’

‘Yeah,’ said Ron forcefully. ‘He never makes eye contact with them, did you notice that? Because he’s always staring at...well...you know what I mean.’

‘Oh, like *you two* don’t ever look at breasts,’ said Ginny, putting her hands on her hips.

‘We don’t!’ Harry and Ron both yelled.

But they both went scarlet in the face, and Ron’s ears burned. Susan and Hermione, meanwhile, took a step toward Ginny so that they stood on either side of her; all three girls now had hands on hips and were looking archly at the boys.

‘Well, okay, but we don’t *leer* at them,’ said Harry defensively. ‘We’re not *lewd* about it or anything.’

‘Yeah,’ said Ron, ‘and Harry only sees Susan’s and I only look at Hermione’s, so--’

‘Ron!’ Hermione gasped.

‘Nice one, Ron,’ said Harry, groaning.

‘Harry, you told him?’ said Susan angrily.

‘Oh, come on, he’s my best mate!’ said Harry quickly.

‘Oh, sure, take HIS side,’ said Susan.

‘This isn’t about taking sides,’ said Ron. ‘I’m just saying we don’t go around drooling all over other girl’s chests. I mean, we don’t do that to you, either, at least I don’t, and not to Susan, obviously. Well, not to Hermione, either. I can’t speak for Harry--’

‘Ron, *shut up*,’ said Harry through gritted teeth.

‘Keep talking, Ron’ said Ginny. ‘You’re doing really well.’

‘Look, I’m just trying to explain that Harry and me--‘

‘Leave me out of this,’ said Harry.

‘--aren’t a couple of dirty pigs like Carmichael!’

‘Oh, is that what you were trying to say, Ron?’ said Ginny.

‘Hey, this is your fault!’ said Ron. ‘You were the one who accused Harry and me of leering at breasts in the first place.’

‘Ron!’ said Harry. ‘My god, would you drop it?’

Ron opened his mouth to protest, but then he noticed that Harry, Hermione, Susan and Ginny were all glaring at him.

‘Sorry,’ he mumbled. He glanced at Hermione and felt his face turn scarlet. ‘Sorry,’ he said again. She rolled her eyes at him, but then she pursed her lips. She was trying very hard not to laugh. Ron didn’t know whether to be embarrassed or relieved.

‘Right,’ said Ginny. ‘So back to the subject at hand. Getting information out of Eddie and Malfoy.’

‘You really think we’re just going to sit by and watch you three flirt with Carmichael?’ said Ron.

‘And how do we plan on getting information out of Malfoy?’ said Harry. ‘Last time I checked he hated all of us.’

‘Malfoy’s a problem,’ said Ginny. ‘I’ve been eavesdropping with Extendable Ears in the library and what, but he’d never buy it if any of us girls started being friendly with him. He’s got it out for Hermione because she’s a Muggle-born and he hates Weasleys and I can’t imagine he thinks much of the Bones family, either. Even he’s not that stupid.’

‘And Eddie IS that stupid?’ said Ron. ‘Look, Ginny, maybe YOU think you can, uh, “get friendly” with him, but Hermione already made it clear that she and I are dating.’

‘And he knows about Harry and me, too,’ said Susan. ‘I told him to back off ages ago.’

‘So, maybe you and Hermione need to have a fight with your boyfriends, break up for a bit, and then cry on Eddie’s shoulder,’ said Ginny at once.

‘I don’t want Hermione doing ANYTHING on that git’s shoulder,’ said Ron.

‘And I already said it’s not your decision to make, Ron,’ said Hermione stiffly.

‘Look, what else can we do?’ said Susan. ‘Ginny might get Luna to tell her who she’s told about the book but that wouldn’t give us the whole picture.’

‘This is ridiculous,’ said Harry. ‘There’s a much easier way to figure out who’s working for Voldemort, you know.’

‘What do you mean?’ Ron started to say, but Hermione cut him off.

‘No, Harry,’ she said at once.

‘Hermione, it’s the only sure way,’ said Harry.

‘What’s the only--’ Ron began, but then he understood. ‘You mean Legilimency.’

‘Harry, Dumbledore told you not to!’ said Hermione.

‘Harry, you can’t,’ said Susan. ‘It’s too dangerous.’

‘Voldemort’s planning on using the deadliest book in the world to wipe out Muggles and you’re telling me Legilimency is too dangerous?’ said Harry sharply.

‘There’s no need to snap at me,’ Susan retorted.

‘Harry, they’re right,’ said Ginny. ‘If you try it and he finds out, he could mess with your head again like last year.’

‘I’ve already thought about that,’ said Harry, trying to control his temper. ‘I’ve thought about this a lot, okay? From every angle. But what choice do we have?’

‘I don’t like it, Harry,’ said Susan.

‘I don’t, either,’ said Harry.

There was a long silence. Ron hated the idea of Harry using Legilimency, but somehow the idea of Hermione cozying up to Eddie seemed worse. Ron’s dislike of the Head Boy now went beyond simple male rivalry. Ron didn’t know just what it was, but something was decidedly off about the Head Boy. The way his dark eyes seemed to glitter with...Ron didn’t know what, but something. Something distinctly not pleasant.

‘Bloody hell,’ said Ron exasperatedly.

‘Ron, don’t swear,’ said Hermione. ‘Look, there’s something else we haven’t considered. What about Wormtail? Maybe Eddie or Malfoy or...or Snape aren’t involved at all and Wormtail is getting inside the castle. He’s an Animagus who changes into a rat. How hard can it be to get into the castle? He’s small enough in his animal form to hide somewhere and eavesdrop all he wants.’

‘Yes, but if Wormtail’s the one, how does he plan on getting Luna and the book out of the castle?’ said Harry. ‘Everyone knows what he looks like as a person and he’s not going to be able to carry Luna and a big book out of here if he’s a rat.’

‘So we’re back to someone working from the inside,’ said Ron. ‘In concert with Wormtail, maybe. Makes sense. There had to be a reason he showed up at Hogsmeade.’

‘Okay, so let’s assume Wormtail’s involved and he has inside help,’ said Susan. ‘What if it’s another Animagus? We know there are unregistered Animagi, right? And it’s not unheard of for students to learn how to do it. Harry’s dad did, and Sirius.’

‘And there’s all kinds of animals all over the place around here,’ said Ron.

‘Yes, but Hogwarts has kneazles, remember?’ said Hermione. ‘Kneazles can detect somebody untrustworthy, especially a Dark Animagus. You can bet Aurors guarding the school are using them. We would have heard about it if an Animagus had been spotted inside the castle or on the grounds.’

‘What about a shape-shifter? Or a Metamorphmagus?’ said Ginny. ‘Can kneazles detect them?’

‘Theoretically, yes,’ said Hermione. ‘But only if they’re untrustworthy. But Metamorphmagi are really rare and shape-shifters even more so.’

‘Why don’t we just have Crookshanks stand near Eddie and see if he hates him?’ Ron suggested. ‘He knew about Scabbers, didn’t he?’

‘Actually, you know, that’s not a bad idea,’ said Hermione. ‘We could find some excuse, something related to prefect duties, and have Eddie come to our common room and Crookshanks could just happen to be down here.’

‘That’s great,’ said Harry, ‘but if it isn’t Eddie we can’t exactly hope to get every student in the school to show up at our common room so that Crookshanks can hiss at them.’

‘Harry, Legilimency is dangerous,’ said Hermione desperately. ‘Please, don’t--’

‘Everything’s dangerous, Hermione,’ said Harry, shaking his head. He held up a hand to still Susan’s protest.

‘I have to do it, Sue,’ he said.

‘Harry, how do you know he won’t catch you at it?’ said Ginny.

‘I’m sure he will,’ said Harry, ‘just like I catch him messing with my head. Look, I only need a few minutes; I know I can hold him off for a couple of minutes. I’ve done it loads of times before.’

‘I dunno, mate,’ said Ron doubtfully.

Harry groaned and closed his eyes, then opened them. ‘Okay, how about this. I do it my room, in front of Ron, yeah? If Ron’s there he can snap me out of it if something goes wrong, or raise the alarm or whatever. And I’ll wait until late at night; if I can

catch Voldemort while he's sleeping I can get in and out before he even knows what happened.'

'Harry--' Susan began.

'Please, Sue,' said Harry. 'Ron...will you help me?'

Hermione looked sharply at Ron, and he swallowed. Truth be told, he didn't want Harry to do Legilimency at all, but he wanted even less to witness Harry doing it. What if something went wrong and Ron couldn't help? Harry's eyes pleaded with him, and against his own inclinations, Ron felt himself nod.

'Yeah, sure,' he said. 'I'll help you, Harry.'

'Ron,' said Hermione, sounding desperate.

'I won't let anything happen to him, 'Mione,' he said, clutching her hand and hoping like hell that it was true. Then he looked at Susan. 'I promise, Susan.'

'There's nothing I can say to make you change your mind, is there?' said Susan, taking Harry's hand.

'No,' he said. 'I'm sorry.'

Susan sighed, but after a moment she nodded.

'All right, then,' said Ginny. 'So...the plan, if you can call it that, is that Harry tries to reach Voldemort, and I try to get Luna to tell me if she's mentioned the book to anyone else. And any other information I can glean.'

‘Some plan,’ said Ron, shaking his head.

‘It’s the best we can do,’ said Harry. For another long moment nobody said anything, and then Harry announced he was going to walk Susan back to the Hufflepuff dormitories. The two of them left through the portrait hole.

‘I’m turning in, too,’ said Ginny. ‘Coming, Hermione?’

‘Yes, in a minute,’ said Hermione. Ginny smiled and headed up the girls’ staircase.

Ron watched his younger sister go and shook his head.

‘Can you believe her?’ he said. ‘Nosy little brat.’

‘Ron,’ said Hermione. ‘I wish...I wish you hadn’t agreed to...help Harry with Occlumency.’

Ron sighed. Of all the things he wanted to do right then, arguing with Hermione was the last.

‘I know, ‘Mione,’ he said. ‘And I don’t want to but you know how he is. If I had said no he would have done it anyway, only he’d do it all by himself, and then Merlin knows what he might get himself into.’

‘Oh, he’s so infuriating sometimes!’ Hermione burst out. ‘Why doesn’t he just go to Dumbledore and...and ASK him if he can do it?’

‘Dumbledore already said no, ‘Mione,’ said Ron. ‘Anyway...I don’t know if Dumbledore is up for dealing with Harry, on top of everything else.’

Hermione looked momentarily scandalized. ‘What does that mean?’

‘Come on, ‘Mione, you saw him,’ said Ron. ‘He looked so old.’

‘He is old, Ron,’ she said.

‘You know what I mean,’ said Ron. ‘He’s tired. How old is he, anyway, 150? And he’s running a school and trying to run the Order and keep the school safe from Voldemort. He can’t keep doing it forever.’

‘I hate this,’ said Hermione suddenly. She looked up at him and her eyes filled with tears. Ron did the only thing he could think of; he pulled her into his arms and held her.

‘It was easier, wasn’t it?’ said Hermione as she rested her head against his chest. ‘When we were little?’

‘I’ll say,’ said Ron. He felt the same dreadful weight he’d felt the night before, in Dumbledore’s office. It wasn’t fair, he decided. They were just kids, really. Okay, teenagers, but still just kids. They should be worried about exams and schoolwork and Quidditch matches and having ice cream cones and thinking about their summer holidays, shouldn’t they? Why did growing up, growing older, have to be so difficult?

Ron’s mind might have drifted further into these thoughts, but then he felt Hermione look up at him, felt her tilt her face up to his and press her lips against his chin. He opened his eyes and looked down and saw her face stained with tears and saw her eyes, shiny and beautiful, and he lowered his mouth to hers and let himself get lost in the sensation of kissing her. And suddenly there was no Lord Voldemort, no evil plot to kill Muggles, no books that contained evil spells, no wars to fight. There was only her, and her lips on his, and her hands in his hair, and her chocolate taste.

Their kissing intensified and they fell onto the sofa; Ron's heartbeat was thrumming in his ears and their hands were moving beneath clothes and getting tangled in one another; hers were on the bare skin of his back, trailing fire; his were on her breasts. It was stifling under his robes and he pulled them off. His hands went to the clasp of Hermione's robes and he hesitated, but when she didn't protest, he pulled open the clasp and shoved her robes aside. Then he pulled off his tie, his jumper, her tie, her jumper. His fingers tugged at the buttons of her blouse; her hands pulled his shirt from the waistband on his trousers. It was frantic and hot as they kissed and caressed, and then Ron shifted and he found himself settled between her legs, and her skirt was riding up. Without thinking, he pressed himself against her.

Hermione suddenly gasped in his ear and said 'Ron, wait.' The same thing she always said when things began to spin out of control. But somehow it was enough to make him come crashing back down to earth.

'Bloody hell,' he heard himself say as he rolled away from her. He hadn't meant to say that, or to groan in frustration, but he was so hot and his trousers were very uncomfortable and his head was spinning.

'Ron...we can't...' she said.

'I know,' he said. Too fast. It was too fast. Too much. Except that a part of him wanted to go fast, didn't want to wait anymore because they could die tomorrow and if that happened he would never know what it would be like...

'Don't be upset,' said Hermione. 'Please.'

'I'm not,' said Ron. I'm not, he said to himself. Disappointed, but not...upset.

'I just...'

'You're not ready,' said Ron.

‘Are you?’ said Hermione.

Ron considered. If he had to be honest, he’d probably been ready from the moment they’d first kissed on the staircase. But it wasn’t his call to make, and he couldn’t bear the idea of being with her in that way if she didn’t really want to. He decided to be completely honest.

‘Yes,’ said Ron. ‘And no. I mean, I want to, okay? But not...if you don’t.’

She nodded, and he sat up and shook his head and tried to smooth his hair.

‘I want to, too,’ she said, so quietly that Ron was almost sure he hadn’t heard her.

‘What?’ he said, if only because he wanted to be sure he’d heard her correctly.

‘I said, I want to,’ said Hermione. ‘But...I’m just...scared.’ She wasn’t looking at him. She began to button her blouse.

‘Okay,’ said Ron. He wasn’t looking at her. He couldn’t. If he did, he might get a little, okay, very excited again.

He also didn’t really understand why she should be scared of...that. Not when Voldemort was planning on murdering everyone in sight.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

‘Don’t apologize,’ he said at once. ‘There’s...there’s nothing to be sorry about. It’s fine.’ He pulled on his shirt. He still didn’t look at her.

‘Are you sure?’

He waited until she’d pulled on her jumper before he looked at her, before he spoke.  
‘I’m sure.’

‘Okay,’ she said, sounding a little more reassured. ‘Good.’

‘Maybe we should, uh, turn in,’ said Ron, standing up and picking up his robes and jumper.

‘Right,’ said Hermione.

He looked at her again, and smiled, and took her hand in his. They walked to the foot of her staircase.

‘Well, good night,’ she said softly.

‘G’night,’ he said. He pressed his lips to her forehead for a long moment and caught the scent of her lilac shampoo. He started to pull away when she put her arms round his waist and pulled him close and hugged him tightly.

‘I...I love you,’ she whispered, and then she pulled away quickly and gave him a lightning-fast peck on the cheek before dashing up her staircase.

It was only when Ron was climbing into bed that the three words Hermione had whispered to him penetrated his brain.

‘Blimey,’ he said to out loud, and he settled down and pulled up the covers and fell asleep with a smile on his lips.

### *Chapter Twenty-Three: Attacks*

It was only the next morning, when Ron awoke, that he noticed that Harry had once again not come back to the dormitory last night. Ron himself had been far too wound up and exhausted and caught up in Hermione and what she’d said to even notice. But now, he stared at the bed next to his and found it neatly made, obviously not slept in, the curtains pulled back.

Ron groaned inwardly and pulled himself out of bed. Neville, Dean and Seamus had already dressed and left the dormitory for breakfast. Ron haphazardly made his bed and then pulled off his pyjamas and wrapped his bath towel round his waist, in preparation for a shower, when the door to the dormitory creaked open, and Harry walked in.

At once Ron noticed that something was...off. Harry looked exhausted. His hair and glasses were completely askew. His clothes were wrinkled. He had dark circles beneath his eyes, and he was pale to the point of pastiness. He’d looked like this plenty of times before. But there was something else.

There was a small, nearly imperceptible smile on his lips and his green eyes, while hazy with lack of sleep, nonetheless managed to twinkle all the same.

‘Hey,’ he said, throwing himself onto his bed.

‘Hey,’ said Ron, studying him for a moment. ‘You...didn’t come back again last night.’

‘Yeah,’ said Harry, trying to sound casual, and he pursed his lips once, then again.

A brief pause, and Ron spoke again. ‘You look knackered.’ He picked up his shampoo bottle and a bar of soap.

‘Yeah,’ said Harry. ‘I am. Feel like I could sleep for a week.’ He pursed his lips a third time and Ron realized he was trying very hard not to grin.

Ron swallowed and suddenly everything was clear. Or at least, he thought it was. Something had happened between Harry and Susan last night, something--judging by the look on Harry’s face--good. Just how good that something was, Ron couldn’t tell, and he found himself torn between wanting to ask and not wanting to know.

‘Susan get back all right?’ he said, trying to sound nonchalant and not looking at his best mate.

Harry gave a little chuckle and then quickly covered it by clearing his throat. ‘Fine.’

Fine, Ron thought. I’ll bet. He realized he couldn’t bring himself to ask, after all.

‘I’m going to have a shower,’ he said lamely, and started past Harry’s bed for the door.

‘We did it,’ said Harry.

Ron dropped his soap and shampoo and turned to look at Harry. He was lying on his bed and staring up at the ceiling with a positively...glowing expression on his face. There was no other word for it. He was grinning ear to ear and his pale face was flushed and he looked ridiculously, stupidly happy.

‘Whoa,’ Ron heard himself say. ‘Uh, you mean--‘

‘Yeah,’ said Harry, and he sat up and looked at Ron and grinned.

‘Bloody hell,’ said Ron, and for a moment he couldn’t think of anything else to say. He just stared at Harry, who was grinning like a fool.

‘Where?’ Ron finally managed.

‘Astronomy Tower,’ said Harry, running a hand through his hopelessly untidy hair.

‘How?’ Ron heard himself say, and then mentally kicked himself for asking the stupidest question he’d ever asked. And he’d asked some very stupid ones in his life.

‘How?’ Harry repeated. ‘Uh, you don’t really want me to explain--’

‘No,’ said Ron quickly. ‘I just meant, uh, how...how did...I mean...things lead up to--’

‘Oh,’ said Harry, and he smiled but looked down at his hands. ‘I dunno. I mean, we were just walking and we started to go back to Hufflepuff but then she said she didn’t want to go back just yet, and we went to the Astronomy Tower instead. And we were, you know, snogging and...she told me she wanted to.’

‘Bloody hell,’ said Ron. ‘Uh, wow.’

‘Yeah,’ said Harry, and he grinned again.

‘How was it?’ Ron asked.

‘How do you think?’ said Harry.

‘I wouldn’t know,’ said Ron, a bit glumly.

‘Oh,’ said Harry. ‘Right.’ He cleared his throat. ‘It was...amazing.’

‘Yeah?’ said Ron, but of course it would be. He’d grown up in a house full of older brothers, all of whom had done the deed (despite what Ginny had said Ron was certain Fred and George had) and all of them, even Percy--stuffed shirt, uptight, priggish Percy--had waxed rhapsodic about the joys of sex.

‘Yeah,’ said Harry. ‘I mean, I always thought it would be but...but in real life it’s...it’s even better. Well, the first time was really awkward--’

‘You did it more than once?’ said Ron, trying not to sound jealous and impressed, which he was.

Harry blushed. ‘Um, yeah. Well, see, uh, the first time...it hurt. For her. And it was sort of, uh, over...really fast. And...and I didn’t want to just leave it at that, so...’

‘I get it,’ said Ron. He bent to pick up his soap and shampoo and tried not let jealousy overwhelm him.

It was petty, being jealous about that. But it was like everything else, wasn’t it? Ron thought. Harry’s always beating me out in everything. Quidditch, money, girls, popularity and now sex.

And then Ron hated himself for feeling like that. Harry and Susan had been going out for a long time, far longer than Ron and Hermione. Harry’s life was a mess. Last night was a nightmare for all of them. Harry was planning on invading the mind of a psychotic Dark Wizard who wanted to murder him. Didn’t he deserve some happiness? Didn’t he deserve to look this stupidly happy?

Yes, he did, Ron thought. And it wasn’t like Ron was deprived of the affections of a girl. He had the best girlfriend in the world, didn’t he? And it wasn’t as if Hermione had said they’d never have sex. Just not right now. Ron had never been the most

patient sort but if he thought about it, he was a damn sight luckier than most blokes. He shouldn't begrudge Harry anything when he himself had it pretty damn good.

'Ron, are you okay?' said Harry, and Ron blinked and came back to himself.

'Yeah,' he said. 'Fine. Listen, mate...congratulations.'

'Thanks,' said Harry, a bit awkwardly. 'Listen, Ron...'

'I'm happy for you,' said Ron quickly. 'I mean it.' And he did.

'Thanks,' Harry said again. 'Though, to be honest...I dunno how I'm supposed to concentrate on anything now. Between getting no sleep and...you know.'

'Yeah, Bill mentioned once that shagging scrambles the brain,' said Ron, grinning. 'But you'd better focus. We've got Double Potions today, and Herbology and Quidditch practice tonight.'

'Right,' said Harry. 'Bugger. How'm I supposed to make it through today? I'm exhausted.'

'No offence, Harry, but I don't feel the least bit sorry for you right now,' said Ron.

And they both laughed.

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The next two weeks passed quickly, and spring settled firmly onto the Hogwarts grounds. The fine weather enticed students out of doors, and Ron, Harry, Hermione and Susan found themselves studying beneath the tree by the lake--sometimes accompanied by Ginny--more often than not.

Their homework increased with the approaching summer term and exams. Snape had returned after his brief absence looking chalkier and more drawn than ever. His temper was unusually short, but for once, Ron and Harry managed to stay out of trouble in Potions lessons. For the first time in six years of class Ron and Harry both managed to complete their assignment--brewing a Confusing Concoction--perfectly, without having to stop and start over. The potion was exactly the right color and texture and when Snape tested it he grumpily reported that it was 'acceptable' and that, 'for once' the 'two biggest dolts in his class, next to Longbottom, of course,' would not be required to do extra homework.

With plenty of assistance from Hermione, Ron had finally mastered most of the sixth year Conjuring Spells for Transfiguration. They were working with hellebore plants in Herbology, which were highly poisonous; Ron found himself getting help from Neville on the finer points of handling and caring for the plants.

Then there were Care of Magical Creatures lessons. For a week Hagrid had them work with Diricawls, birds who could vanish at will.

'These are bloody tame by Hagrid's standards,' Ron remarked dryly, as his Diricawl vanished in a cloud of feathers. 'Downright boring, even.'

The following week, however, things were back to normal in Care of Magical Creatures. Ron's heart sank as he, Harry and Hermione gathered round the outside of Hagrid's hut and Hagrid gave them all a gleeful smile.

'Uh, oh,' said Harry. 'When he smiles like that, it can't be good.'

Behind Hagrid was a crudely constructed wooden hut.

‘Hello, class,’ Hagrid boomed. ‘Today I’ve got a special treat for yeh. We’re workin’ with Ashwinders. Professor Snape needs Ashwinder eggs for his N.E.W.T. lessons, and it’s up to us to get ‘em for him.’

‘Oh, dear,’ said Hermione.

‘What are Ashwinders?’ whispered Ron.

Hermione rolled her eyes. ‘Ron, do you *ever* read your textbooks?’

‘Who can tell me what an Ashwinder is?’ said Hagrid, and Hermione’s hand shot up. Hagrid grinned and nodded at her.

‘Ashwinders are serpents,’ said Hermione. ‘They appear out of magical fires and will seek out dark corners in old buildings to lay eggs. The eggs are very useful in certain potions but they are fiery-hot, and if they don’t get frozen quickly enough, they burst into flame and burn down buildings.’

‘Wonderful,’ Ron muttered.

‘Grea’ job, Hermione,’ said Hagrid, beaming. ‘Ten points to Gryffindor. So, what we have to do is conjure up some Ashwinder fires. Then we’ll put the Ashwinders in this big hut here and wait for ‘em to lay their eggs. Takes ‘em a couple of weeks, see? And once they’ve done that we’ll collect the eggs and freeze ‘em for Professor Snape.’

‘Excuse me,’ said a drawling, irritable voice. ‘Just how are we supposed to handle Ashwinder eggs? Won’t we burn our hands?’

Ron rolled his eyes, and Hagrid grunted in irritation.

‘Are ye a wizard, Malfoy, or ain’ ye? You don’t HANDLE Ashwinder eggs, you levitate ‘em with yer wand,’ said Hagrid.

‘Oh, naturally,’ Malfoy sneered.

Hagrid ignored him and said, ‘Who here can conjure up an Ashwinder fire?’

Nobody was surprised when Hermione volunteered, and produced a perfect fire out of which, after burning steadily for a few minutes, slithered a skinny grey serpent with glowing red eyes.

‘Another ten points for Gryffindor,’ said Hagrid, winking at Hermione. For the next hour the students worked on conjuring Ashwinder fires. Ron had never been good at conjuring any fires at all, and in the end he, Harry and Malfoy and his cronies were all given extra homework.

‘Bloody hell,’ said Ron irritably at the end of the lesson. ‘Deadly plants in Herbology and now this.’

‘Ron, don’t swear,’ said Hermione. ‘At least this time Hagrid’s having us work with useful dangerous creatures.’

‘Right,’ said Harry. ‘Useful. Maybe we could leave an unfrozen egg in Snape’s office and let it burn down. That would be useful.’

‘Harry,’ said Hermione warningly, but Ron cut her off with a look. There was no point arguing with Harry’s hatred of Snape.

Quidditch practices became more intense as the season wound down. The final match was coming up, and the Slytherins and the Gryffindors were constantly battling for time on the pitch.

On top of all this was trying to stay on top of Voldemort's plans. Harry had been true to his word about using Legilimency, and Ron found himself sitting at the foot of Harry's bed, watching his best mate go into a weird, trance-like state in the late hours of the night as he tried to penetrate the reaches of Voldemort's mind. So far, Harry wasn't having any luck, and he was getting more and more frustrated. The most he could report, he said, were 'twinges' in his scar.

Ron, for his part, hated watching the whole thing altogether. He was nervous that something would go wrong, that Harry would fall into some sort of trap set by Voldemort, or that Voldemort would somehow manage to possess Harry's mind, the way he had done Ginny's, and Ron wouldn't be able to stop it.

Ginny, meanwhile, had fallen into her role as their unofficial spy with much enthusiasm. Hermione insisted that Dumbledore needed to be told of Ginny's involvement, and in the end, they all agreed. Ginny, therefore, had approached McGonagall and the Headmaster with what she knew. Dumbledore agreed to allow Ginny to act as an information gatherer, with promises that Ginny would tell them all she learned.

In the end she had little to report. Luna was spending more time with Eddie, which Ron immediately found suspicious. But Ginny insisted that Luna hadn't told anyone but her about the book, and considering that nothing untoward had happened, everyone was forced to accept Ginny's word.

Ginny also reported that Luna was becoming more and more frightened of the book by the day and was spending every spare moment she had searching for a way to get rid of it. Dumbledore sighed and said that he and McGonagall, too, had been searching for a way, but had had no luck at all. They all agreed that it was still too soon to tell Luna anything. If they were lucky, she would find a way to destroy the book herself. In the meantime, they maintained their outward show of normalcy.

For two solid weeks, therefore, Ron and his friends found themselves in a holding pattern where Voldemort's plans were concerned. There was, additionally, nothing new reported in *The Daily Prophet*, which they all read every morning. It was frustrating, but they were kept so busy with schoolwork that they had little time to dwell on things.

And then there was Hermione. She and Ron didn't have much time to spend together alone, but what time they did have, they made the most of. Ron was delighted that she let things go a bit further than they had before, but he couldn't help feel a twinge of jealousy over Harry and Susan all the same. Harry was in a very good mood for the most part and Ron knew it was because they'd managed to sneak off together. Harry insisted they didn't shag *all* the time, but Ron wondered, because Harry always seemed to have that tired-but-absurdly-pleased look on his face of late.

All in all, things were about as normal as they could be, considering.

Until one morning in mid-May.

Things started out usual enough. Ron awoke and he and Harry went down to breakfast. For once, Harry had foregone his nightly rendezvous with Susan in favour of getting a good night's sleep ('It's fun as all hell but it's a lot harder to do when you're bloody exhausted,' said Harry, to which Ron said, 'Funny, but once again I really don't feel sorry for you.').

They met Hermione and Ginny at the Gryffindor table, and Susan joined them.

The owls flew in with the morning post, and Hermione received the latest issue of *The Daily Prophet*, which they all pored over, finding nothing untoward. It was just another normal morning.

But then, Harry looked up at the staff table and started.

'What?' said Ron and Hermione together.

'Where's Dumbledore?' said Harry, his voice tight.

They looked up, and indeed, the Headmaster was nowhere to be seen. Nor was--

‘McGonagall’s not there, either,’ said Ginny, and her forehead creased with worry. ‘Or Snape. Or...Flitwick. Good lord. Half the staff aren’t here, are they?’

‘Maybe they’re in a meeting,’ Hermione suggested. ‘They’ve missed breakfast before.’

It was true, but something about their absence today was different. Ron couldn’t quite place just what was different.

He was mulling this over when McGonagall, in fact, entered the Great Hall. She strode resolutely over to the Gryffindor table. Her face was pale and pinched and her lips were pursed in a tight line. She came right up to the table.

‘Miss Granger,’ she said, in a tight voice, ‘I need to speak with you right away.’

Something in McGonagall’s tone made Ron’s throat close. Hermione blanched.

‘Wh-what is it?’ she said, her voice barely a whisper.

‘I’d rather not go into it here,’ McGonagall said. ‘Please, Miss Granger, come with me.’

Hermione swallowed hard, and Ron felt his stomach clench. Something was very, very wrong. She started to get up, and Ron followed suit.

‘Mr. Weasley, I don’t think--’

‘If this is about Hermione, I want to know,’ said Ron firmly. He took Hermione’s hand in his.

‘So do we,’ said Harry, and he, Susan and Ginny all got up.

McGonagall’s eyes narrowed.

‘Please, Professor,’ said Hermione, and her voice was shaking. ‘I--I want them with me.’ She clutched Ron’s hand tightly.

‘Very well,’ said McGonagall. ‘You’d have told them everything anyway. Let’s go to my office.’

The five of them followed McGonagall out of the Great Hall and to her office; the whole way there, nobody said a word. Hermione was pale and Ron felt her trembling as he clutched her hand.

They reached McGonagall’s office and filed in, and McGonagall shut the door behind them. They gathered round her desk and she crossed behind it and stood there for a moment, looking sternly down at them.

Then her eyes fell on Hermione, and her face softened just a bit.

‘Miss Granger, I regret to inform you that...your house was attacked last night,’ said McGonagall, her voice strained. ‘By Death Eaters.’

Hermione gasped and her hand flew to her mouth. Ron felt his stomach clench as he put his arm round Hermione, who swayed. Harry, Susan and Ginny were all silent, their eyes wide with horror.

‘I--I need to sit,’ said Hermione weakly, and McGonagall quickly conjured a chair and Hermione sank into it. Ron knelt down next to her, still clutching her hand. He felt hopelessly inadequate. She was trembling and her skin was alabaster-pale.

‘What happened?’ Harry croaked. He looked stricken, and Ron knew why.

‘It was much like the attacks on the pure-blood houses,’ said McGonagall. ‘We can only assume that the Death Eaters were looking for the book. The house was torn apart, as were the lawns.’

‘Oh,’ said Hermione, her voice sounding strangled. ‘My...my mum and dad...’

McGonagall closed her eyes. ‘They were in the house.’

‘Oh, my god,’ Hermione croaked, and she began to shake violently. Ron rose up on his knees and pulled her to him, holding her hard. She sank against him and clung to him.

‘They’re alive, Miss Granger,’ said McGonagall. ‘But they were injured. Badly. The Death Eaters...tortured them.’

‘No...no...no...’ Hermione moaned.

‘They’re in St. Mungo’s,’ said McGonagall quickly. ‘They’re going to recover, Hermione. I promise. The Death Eaters let them go quickly enough when they realized the book was not in their possession.’

‘There was nothing in the *Prophet* about this,’ Ginny whispered.

‘Once again, it was agreed that the attack was best kept under wraps,’ said McGonagall.

‘Oh yeah?’ said Ron, angrily. ‘And who decided that, huh? The Ministry? Didn’t want to embarrass themselves that they can’t catch the Death Eaters who are going round attacking everyone?’

‘Ron, don’t,’ said Hermione.

‘No, Hermione,’ said Ron furiously. ‘Bloody hell. They’re attacking Muggles now! Your parents!’

‘The Order can’t--’ McGonagall began.

‘Bugger the Order!’ Ron yelled.

‘Ron!’ Hermione gasped.

‘Mr. Weasley!’ snapped McGonagall, scandalized.

‘No, you listen,’ said Ron, and he stood up and clutched Hermione’s shoulder. ‘This is getting ridiculous. It was bad enough when the Ministry was covering up Vol-Voldemort’s stuff last year, but now the Order is hushing things up?’

‘You know perfectly well why, Weasley,’ said McGonagall, her eyes flashing dangerously.

‘So what?’ said Ron. ‘Maybe it’s time for the bloody Order to--’

‘Ron, shut up!’ Hermione yelled, and she jerked away from him and stood, walking over to the corner of McGonagall’s office.

‘Wha--?’ Ron began, entirely flummoxed by Hermione’s reaction.

‘Ron,’ said Harry slowly, and Ron looked at him. Harry’s eyes were red-rimmed, and he looked stricken. Guilt-stricken.

‘I didn’t see it,’ said Harry slowly. ‘I...I didn’t...why didn’t I see it? My stupid scar always hurts when he’s about to--‘

‘This isn’t your fault, Harry,’ said Hermione.

‘It’s nobody’s fault,’ said McGonagall firmly. ‘Nobody but the Death Eaters and...and You-Know-Who.’

Nobody said anything for a long moment, but then Ginny spoke up, very quietly.

‘Why...why would they go after the book at Hermione’s house?’ said Ginny. ‘She’s Muggle-born--‘

‘Miss Granger’s parents are not the extent of her ancestry,’ said McGonagall evenly. ‘Morgan has Muggles and Squibs in her bloodline, after all, and I think it’s safe to say that some of the Death Eaters are aware of Miss Granger’s magical talents.’

Ron swallowed and nodded. Of course. Hermione was the cleverest witch he’d ever known, and quite possibly the cleverest witch Hogwarts had seen since, well, McGonagall. Hermione would be powerful enough to use the book, if it belonged to her. Ron stared at Hermione, who was looking down at her shoes, but not crying. He wanted to go to her, but something held him back. She was angry at him for some reason.

‘Professor,’ said Harry. ‘Where’s Dumbledore?’

‘He is at Headquarters,’ said McGonagall. ‘There’s an emergency meeting. He’s put me in charge here. I can’t say how long he’ll be away.’

‘But...but Professor,’ said Ron nervously. ‘If he’s not here, don’t you think Voldemort--’

‘We’ve increased security on the school, Mr. Weasley,’ said McGonagall evenly. ‘More Aurors are coming today, and we’ve added additional wards. It’s the best we can do under the circumstances, but for now the Order doesn’t believe You-Know-Who will attempt an attack on the school.’

‘Professor,’ said Hermione, and her voice was small and frightened and vulnerable. ‘What...what’s going to happen to my parents?’

‘They’ll be treated,’ said McGonagall gently. ‘And moved to a safe location. A few Order members have gone ahead and are taking care of the house; it’s being cleaned and repaired. They’ve taken all the necessary steps to ensure that other Muggles don’t see the damage and that the press doesn’t get wind of it.’

‘Can I see them?’ Hermione pleaded.

‘I’m afraid not, dear,’ said McGonagall, and her voice was as kind as Ron had ever heard it. ‘They’re unconscious right now; they’re being kept that way while the healers work on them. And they’re going to be given Memory Charms once they’ve been moved and it’s all over. They’ll know they’ve been moved and they’ll be told some of the reasons why, but they won’t remember that they were attacked. It’s for their own safety. But if you wish to write them, I’ll be happy to send them a message.’

‘Th-thank you,’ said Hermione. ‘I will.’ Her eyes flickered over to Ron for a moment, then away.

‘I know this is difficult,’ said McGonagall, and for the first time that morning, her voice cracked, just a bit. ‘But we have to stay here, and stay calm. Miss Granger, if you’re not up for lessons today, I’m happy to make your excuses to the other professors.’

‘No,’ said Hermione at once. ‘I...I want to stay busy.’

McGonagall regarded her for a moment, then nodded. ‘So be it. The rest of you should go to lessons as planned. And say nothing about this. Understood?’

‘Yes, Professor,’ they all mumbled. Hermione bit her lip and started out of the office. Harry, Susan and Ginny followed her, with Ron bringing up the rear. Once outside the office, Ron caught up to Hermione and grabbed her hand.

‘Hermione--’ he began.

‘Don’t, Ron,’ she said, pulling her hand away and not looking at him. ‘Just...don’t. We...we have to go to class.’

She walked away without looking at him, and Ron felt a sharp pain in his chest. He didn’t know why she was angry with him. Why wouldn’t she let him at least hug her, or something? He knew she was hurting and frightened, and all he wanted to do was comfort her. Why wouldn’t she let him?

The day that followed was among the five worst of Ron’s life. It was nearly as bad as that dreadful night last Christmas when his father had been attacked by the snake. Hermione was cool and distant toward him; she didn’t look at him for the whole day and in spite of himself, Ron felt anger begin to boil in him. It wasn’t fair for her to be upset with him. Hadn’t she given him the third degree about shutting her out that night when he’d learned that his house had been attacked by Death Eaters? Now she was doing the same to him. She was being...a hypocrite.

Ron held his tongue, however, because he didn't think he had the energy to row with her. Not right then, in any case. Maybe later, after Quidditch practice.

Harry, Susan and Ginny had been mostly silent for the day, as well. They said nothing to each other at meals, but Ron noticed that Harry's guilty expression had faded, to be replaced by one of grim determination. Determination to do what, Ron couldn't say, but it made him uneasy. Harry'd had the same look last year when he decided to go after Sirius at the Department of Mysteries. Ron could only hope Harry wasn't thinking of doing something stupid.

Ron was grateful when Quidditch practice finally came around. At first he wasn't sure he could possibly keep his mind on it, what with worrying about--and being angry with--Hermione, but after a few minutes of hard practice, Ron found himself focusing on the game completely. He understood completely why Harry found Quidditch to be therapeutic. For a good three hours Ron thought of nothing but blocking goals; it was the best practice of his life.

At ten o'clock the team was tired and sweaty, and Ron decided that he'd just have to confront Hermione tomorrow. He was too exhausted to bother with it now. He opted for a shower in the changing rooms before heading back up to the castle.

The rest of the team headed to the castle right after practice, leaving Ron alone. He stood under the shower for what felt like a long time, letting the water sluice over him, and his mind wandered back to Hermione, to Voldemort, to everything that was happening. And things were happening. Ron could feel it in his bones. Something was coming. It was only a matter of time. He wondered how, and if, he could survive it. If Harry would survive it. If Hermione...

He wondered if he could protect his friends. Ron shook his head and began to scrub his skin, a bit harder than usual, in the hopes of somehow scrubbing his brain of painful thoughts in the process. He looked at his forearms, and noticed that the scars there were almost completely faded. He hadn't had a vision in months. Somehow this wasn't a comfort to him. But scrubbing himself until his skin was pink, that was comforting. He felt a little better when he finally turned off the shower, dried off, and pulled on his jeans and a jumper.

He picked up his Quidditch gear and started out of the Gryffindor tent when the flap was pulled aside and someone came in. It was Hermione.

‘Hi,’ she said, and her voice was weak and tired sounding.

‘Hi,’ he said back, and he felt himself putting his gear down. He didn’t move, however. He just watched her and waited for her to speak. He wanted her to speak before he did. She did.

‘I...I wrote to my mum and dad,’ she said. ‘I told them I was okay.’

‘They’ll be glad to hear that,’ said Ron. ‘When...when they wake up.’

She nodded, and didn’t say anything for a moment. She seemed to be steeling herself.

‘Ron,’ she said, and her voice shook. ‘I’m sorry. I’m sorry I...I yelled at you before.’ She paused, and her lip began to tremble, and her breathing became strained. She was struggling mightily not to cry. Ron felt his anger at her crumble.

‘I’m just...’ she said, and she blinked and a single tear escaped to stream down her cheek. ‘I’m just really scared.’ She bit her lip, and that was it.

Ron crossed to her and pulled her into a fierce hug, and she broke down.

‘Shh,’ he whispered, as he stroked her hair and tried to calm the trembling of her body as she cried. ‘It’s okay. I’m here. I’m here.’

They stayed that way for a long time, long enough that her sobs eventually quieted and her trembling stopped. He pulled back and looked down at her. Her eyes were swollen and red.

‘I’m sorry I...lost my head,’ she said, blushing.

‘Don’t apologize for that,’ said Ron. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Not really,’ said Hermione, and she looked up at him with a strange expression in her eyes, something that Ron couldn’t quite place. He felt a bit stupid, and useless, too. If he couldn’t make her feel better, what good was he as a boyfriend?

‘Is there anything I can do?’ he asked, trying not to sound desperate.

Hermione nodded, and gave a sniff, and before he knew it, she was kissing him, harder and a bit more frantically than she ever had before; Ron almost stumbled from the force of it, and for a brief second he wondered just why she was doing this, and whether it was such a good idea, but her mouth was hot and her tongue and lips were soft, and suddenly he couldn’t think anymore.

She was kissing his neck now, and sliding her hands up beneath his jumper, onto his back, then around to his bare stomach, over his chest. Then her lips were on his again and his hands moved beneath her shirt and caressed her skin and just as he reached around and unhooked her bra he realized they were standing in the middle of the bloody Quidditch tent and perhaps now would be a good time to stop.

Except that Hermione had other ideas, and he felt her pulling him down, down onto the grass, which was cool and slightly damp, down on top of her.

‘Hermione,’ Ron gasped. ‘Merlin...what...’

‘Don’t talk,’ she begged, and she kissed him again, and he didn’t talk. He shifted and found himself between her legs; her skirt had hitched up and he groaned and pressed up against her; she moaned underneath him and he pressed against her again. He couldn’t think--his whole body was on fire and he began to wonder if she was going to ask him to have sex right there in the Quidditch tent. Or at least part of him hoped she would, because his trousers were killing him now and grinding up against her, feeling the heat of her even through the layers of fabric separating them, was driving

him mad. His hands found her hips and he felt lacy knickers, and smooth thighs, and her round bottom.

Bloody hell, she felt amazing. But the small part of his brain that WAS thinking, was thinking that doing it for the first time in the Quidditch tent wasn't his idea of romantic.

'Hermione,' he gasped again. 'We can't...'

'I know,' she said, panting. 'I...just...Ron...please...'

Please what? he was about to ask, but then she took his left hand, which had been at her breast, and moved it down, lower, lower. His hand was on her tummy when he realized what she wanted, and he wanted it, too, but he'd never done it before and his hand felt really huge and callused and clumsy.

'Are you sure?' he asked, barely able to get the words out, as his fingers traced over the lace waistband of her knickers. Her face, her chest were flushed, her eyes were dark and her lips were red and wet and she was so beautiful Ron wished he could burn the image of her into his mind.

'Yes,' she whispered.

He kissed her mouth gently, and let his hand move, and after a very tentative start to things he watched as she panted and gasped and moaned, and it was the craziest, sexiest thing he'd ever seen in his life, most especially because it was Hermione; because she was losing herself so completely to feelings, and he was creating those feelings.

Afterward, they lay together, entwined, on the grass, their clothes askew.

'Was that okay?' Ron asked, feeling ridiculous but wanting to know all the same.

Hermione looked up at him and blushed. 'It was lovely.'

'Oh,' said Ron. 'Good.' He tried not to grin.

'I do feel better,' she said, and she gave a kind of nervous giggle.

'Yeah?' said Ron, and now he grinned.

'Yes,' said Hermione, and she gave him a gentle nudge in his side.

'Sorry about, uh, well...Quidditch does a number on my hands...' he said, and he felt his ears get red.

'I told you, I like your hands,' said Hermione, and she was very red in the face now. Ron couldn't resist.

'You like them even more now, I'll bet,' he joked.

'Ron,' said Hermione, rolling her eyes and smiling.

They cuddled for some time after that, until it began to feel cold on the grass, before returning to the castle.

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Some time later, Ron entered the dormitory to find Seamus, Dean and Neville fast asleep. But not Harry. He was sitting up, in his pyjamas, on top of the covers of his bed.

‘Hey,’ he said softly, as Ron shut the dormitory door quietly behind him. ‘Hermione okay?’

Ron paused and bit his lip. ‘Okay’ wasn’t exactly the word he would have chosen. In truth, he wasn’t quite sure HOW Hermione was now, considering what had happened after she’d cried on his shoulder. She’d seemed a bit embarrassed by the whole thing. Ron decided not to say anything about that part.

‘As well as she can be,’ said Ron, also talking quietly. He walked slowly over to Harry’s bed and sank down onto the end of it. ‘Shit. Harry, they...they attacked her parents.’

‘I know,’ said Harry, his jaw clenching.

‘They’re Muggles,’ said Ron miserably. ‘What--what can they do against Death Eaters?’

‘Buy a gun,’ said Harry darkly. ‘Other than that, not much.’

‘Things are happening,’ said Ron. ‘It’s...it’s getting bad. And I feel like we’re stuck here and we can’t bloody DO anything.’

Harry nodded, and for a moment they were silent. Then Harry spoke.

‘I should have seen it. I should have SEEN that attack coming, and I didn’t.’

‘It’s not your fault, mate,’ said Ron.

‘It IS my fault,’ Harry hissed. ‘I’m the only one who has this bloody...mind meld thing with Voldemort, aren’t I? I’ve seen all sorts of his stuff in the past, I should have seen this.’

‘Dammit, Harry,’ said Ron furiously, struggling to keep from yelling. ‘Would you stop blaming yourself? Hermione feels bad enough as it is, she doesn’t need you feeling guilty.’

‘What are you saying?’ said Harry angrily, remembering, at least, to whisper.

‘I’m saying,’ said Ron, ‘that it isn’t all about you. This...this war isn’t all about you. They would have gone after Hermione’s parents one way or another. Just like they went after my parents. You didn’t see that coming, did you? But it happened. You can’t do this by yourself, you can’t make it all about you.’

‘That’s bullshit,’ Harry snapped. ‘I’m not--’

‘Yes, you are,’ said Ron. ‘You’ve been doing it since Cedric died. I know you didn’t ask for...for all the stuff that’s on you but you can’t keep thinking that everything that goes wrong is your fault. Because it’s not. Voldemort is a sick bastard and he’s doing this stuff because...because he wants to scare everyone and he wants to freak you out.’

‘Oh, really?’ said Harry. ‘I’d say it’s working, then.’

‘Then you’re...you’re giving him what he wants,’ said Ron. ‘He wants you to crack, Harry. That’s why he’s doing all this stuff. He wants you to push everyone away so that...so that you’ll face him alone and he can finally kill you. And if you do that, if you take it all on yourself and shove us to the side he WILL kill you, and then we’re all screwed.’

Harry said nothing, only stared at Ron. Ron felt himself redden; he'd not meant to say all those things to Harry, but after spending two hours with Hermione, comforting her and holding her and trying not to feel like the whole bloody world was cracking at the seams, Ron himself had snapped.

'Since when did you get so smart about...about people?' said Harry. 'Although calling Voldemort a person is a stretch.'

'Look who I have for a girlfriend,' said Ron, shrugging.

'Right,' said Harry. Another silence. Ron was exhausted and he wanted to go to bed, but he felt like there was something still left, something unresolved. Harry's body was tense, crackling with energy, and when Ron looked at his face, he saw that grim determination again.

'What?' said Ron, but he had a feeling he knew what was coming.

'I want to try again,' said Harry.

Ron sighed. 'Harry, we're both bloody exhausted--'

'Ron, I'm asking you to help me,' he said, looking at his hands, and he went red. 'I'm asking you to...to stay up for one hour and help me try again. I'm not going to give up on this, okay? Things are coming to a head and...and if there's anything I can do to stop it, I have to do it. But...you're right. I can't do it alone. I'm asking you to help me.'

Ron sighed again. 'Yeah,' he said wearily. 'Of course I'll help you.'

Harry looked up at him. His eyes were stricken.

‘Are you sure Hermione’s okay?’ he asked.

‘Yeah,’ said Ron firmly. ‘Yeah. She’s tough. You know that.’

‘Yeah, I know that,’ said Harry, smiling slightly. ‘Look, I just need to stay awake for another hour. Voldemort has to sleep sometime, right? I’ll stay up another hour and then...do my thing.’

Ron sighed. ‘I’ll get my chess set.’

The two of them played chess for just over an hour; after the fourth game Ron could hardly keep his eyes open, but he still won easily.

‘One of these days,’ said Harry sleepily, ‘I’m going to beat you.’

‘Don’t hold your breath, mate,’ said Ron, yawning.

‘Go to bed,’ said Harry. ‘I think I’ll just try to, you know.’

‘I’m not going to sleep,’ said Ron firmly, stifling another yawn. ‘I’m supposed to be awake for this, remember?’

‘Ron, you’re half-asleep as it is,’ said Harry. ‘I’ll be fine, okay. Just go to bed.’

‘No,’ said Ron stubbornly.

Harry snorted and rolled his eyes. ‘Stubborn git. Fine. Just...get off my bed, then. I can’t do this if you’re right there.’

‘All right,’ Ron grumped, and he moved to his own bed and sat down, leaning back against the pillows. ‘Just...just don’t do anything stupid,’ he added.

‘I won’t,’ said Harry. He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them. ‘Ron, don’t watch me.’

‘What?’ said Ron. ‘I’m supposed to watch you, remember?’

‘Maybe that’s why I haven’t been able to get anywhere,’ said Harry impatiently. ‘Because I’m all...self-conscious about you watching me.’

‘If I can’t watch you then how’m I s’posed to make sure you don’t go barking or get possessed or something?’

‘Bloody hell,’ Harry grunted. ‘Look, just...just don’t watch for a few minutes, all right? Let me at least...establish a connection here before you start gawking at me.’

‘Fine,’ said Ron, rolling his eyes. ‘Stubborn git.’

Harry threw a pillow at Ron and it hit him weakly on the head; Ron threw it back.

‘Ron, I’m trying to concentrate,’ said Harry.

‘Yeah, yeah,’ said Ron.

‘Don’t watch,’ said Harry.

‘I’m not,’ Ron hissed. ‘Bloody hell, Harry.’

‘Shut it,’ said Harry. Ron opened his mouth to retort, but decided against it. At this rate they could go on all night sniping at one another, or they could both shut up and let Harry get to work. Ron opted for the latter.

He kept his eyes fixed on the ceiling and waited for Harry to do whatever it was he did to make a mental connection with the most evil Dark Wizard in centuries. The ceiling above Ron's bed was faintly blue from the moonlight that streamed in through the window. It was a soft, comforting sort of silver-blue glow that caused Ron to feel very relaxed. He felt his eyelids growing heavy. He was so tired...

His eyes snapped open in time to see Hermione. She looked so radiant and beautiful and her hair was blowing in the warm spring breeze. Ron wasn't sure how he ended up outside, or how it was daylight, but he was there, and Hermione was smiling up at him, holding his hand. She leaned up to kiss him, and he kissed her back, and he put his arms round her and felt the press of her body against his and his hands moved across her back and into her hair. It was perfect.

She broke the kiss and smiled, then leaned up and whispered something in his ear. He wasn't sure what she said, but she was smiling and then she took his hand and starting walking backwards, beckoning him to follow her. He did. He couldn't imagine where they were going, but the look on her face was so intoxicating that he began to realize that maybe she had decided she didn't want to wait after all. His heart raced and his blood pounded in his ears. She smiled up at him and then turned away from him, still tugging on his hand. He tried to keep up with her but his feet felt so heavy.

She turned back to him, and he stopped. Hermione wasn't Hermione anymore. She was Eddie. Eddie was clutching his hand and pulling on him. Eddie's flesh was burning him, and Ron yanked his hand away. The Head Boy's eyes flashed blue-grey, then dark, almost black. He smiled, and it was a smile that made Ron's blood run cold.

Eddie was saying something and Ron began to back away, but then Eddie changed back into Hermione, and she was beckoning him again, and Ron felt his blood get hot again, and she took his hand and changed again. Not back to Eddie.

She was a black-haired witch with hooded eyes and pale skin and a sinister smile on her face. She was beautiful, but her face was ravaged by time. She pulled on Ron and he felt himself propelled forward, toward this witch he didn't know, but he was afraid of. She began to laugh, a sharp, shrieking sort of laugh, and she was pulling on his hand and dragging him somewhere that he didn't want to go, and laughing the whole time, and he tried to get away but he couldn't...

'No!' Ron sat up in bed, blinking. For a moment he wondered whether he had just yelled out loud. But the voice yelling in the room wasn't his. Seamus, Dean and Neville all grumbled and sat up slowly. Ron looked over at Harry, who was thrashing

horribly in his bed.

‘Harry!’ Ron yelled, jumping off his own bed and rushing to Harry’s. He’d fallen asleep. Bloody hell, he’d gone and fallen asleep when he was supposed to be looking out for Harry.

‘Wake up, mate!’ Ron yelled desperately.

‘Dementors!’ Harry moaned. ‘Get out! Get everyone out! *Expecto Patronum!* Percy...Percy, get away!’

Ron felt his stomach sink like a stone. ‘Harry, wake up!’ Ron shook Harry's shoulders. Harry's eyes blinked open.

‘Ron!’ he yelped. He was trembling violently and covered with sweat. ‘I’m...I’m gonna be sick...’ he croaked. Ron leapt out of the way as Harry vomited over the side of his bed. By now, Seamus, Dean and Neville were fully awake, lanterns lit, as they stared in horror at Harry.

‘Neville, get McGonagall!’ Ron ordered.

‘Right,’ Neville said in a squeaky voice, and he stumbled out of the dormitory.

‘What can we do?’ asked Dean.

‘Nothing,’ said Ron, and he gripped Harry's shoulders to try and stop him from shaking. ‘It's another one of his visions. It...it just has to run its course.’

‘Ron,’ said Harry weakly. ‘An attack...at the Ministry...Percy...’

‘What about Percy?’ Ron asked, feeling his stomach lurch again. ‘What...what happened to him?’

‘Percy...hurt,’ Harry gasped, trying to bring his breathing under control. ‘I saw it. Dementors...chasing him. He got away...but...he's hurt...other people are hurt...happened...happened just now...Dumbledore...’ Harry's eyelids were fluttering and he seemed to be trying to say something else, but he passed out instead.

At that very moment Professor McGonagall burst in with Neville, followed by Ginny and Hermione, both in nightgowns and robes.

‘What happened?’ McGonagall barked, still fumbling with the belt of her robe.

‘He had a vision,’ said Ron. ‘There...there was an attack. At the Ministry.’

## *Chapter Twenty Four: A Reconciliation*

An hour later, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Susan and Harry were in the hospital wing; Harry occupied one of the beds and the rest sat round him in chairs. McGonagall had gone back to fetch some of the other teachers. Madam Pomfrey dabbed Harry's forehead with a cool cloth.

'I'm FINE,' Harry said irritably, squirming away from Madam Pomfrey.

'Oh, hold STILL, Potter,' Pomfrey snapped. She put the cloth down and took a vial of potion from the bedside table. 'Now drink this.'

Harry groaned but took the potion and downed it in one. He grimaced. Ron didn't blame him. Why was it that potions that were meant to cure one always tasted foul?

Whatever the potion was, it seemed to have a good effect; Harry's wan color faded and his cheeks went pink, and he seemed to sit up straighter as strength flowed back into his body. He looked up at Ron and swallowed; Ron, for his part, was trying not to think about what had happened to Percy. It was horrible not knowing the details. For all Ron knew, Percy could be dead. Harry hadn't been able to determine if Percy had survived the attack on the Ministry.

'Feeling better, then, Potter?' said Madam Pomfrey.

'Yes,' said Harry firmly. 'Can I please go?'

She looked at him through narrowed eyes. 'I'd prefer to keep you here for the rest of the night...'

'Please,' said Harry, sounding very contrite and pleading, 'I'll sleep better in my own bed.'

‘Hmmp!’ said Pomfrey, with a dubious look on her face. ‘I don’t know about that. But I suppose you’re fine, and in any case Weasley’s done a fair enough job keeping an eye on you. Fine. Go on, then.’

Harry smiled gratefully and pulled back the covers of his bed, as Ron and the others stood.

Madam Pomfrey started to sweep out of the room when the door to the hospital wing swung open. Professor McGonagall came in, followed by Snape, Flitwick, Sprout and Bill.

‘Poppy,’ said McGonagall imperiously, and Madam Pomfrey rushed over to her. Ron watched as McGonagall spoke in low tones--he couldn’t make out the words--to Pomfrey. Pomfrey’s eyes went wide and she clapped a hand over her mouth, and Ron heard McGonagall say ‘We’ll discuss it shortly.’

With this, McGonagall moved toward Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Susan.

‘Feeling better, Potter?’ she said, looking down at Harry.

‘Yes, Professor,’ said Harry. ‘I’m fine.’

‘Good,’ she said briskly. ‘I received a brief report on the attack from your father, Mr. Weasley, Miss Weasley. The details are sketchy at this point but your father is fine.’

‘What about Percy?’ said Ginny, chewing her lower lip.

‘Percy is alive,’ said McGonagall, in a somber tone. ‘He’s been badly hurt and is in St. Mungo’s. I’m afraid your father didn’t give me any details on your brother. But Arthur did tell me that...I’m afraid Madam Bones was severely injured in the attack.’

Susan gasped. 'Oh, no.' Harry put his arm round her shoulder.

'Your aunt is alive, Miss Bones,' said McGonagall kindly. 'But she is unconscious. She, too, is at St. Mungo's.'

'Can--can I go see her?' Susan asked, but McGonagall shook her head.

'She's under guard right now,' said McGonagall, 'and the hospital won't allow visitors. It's for her own safety. And the healers need to be able to work on her in peace.'

Susan's eyes filled with tears; she blinked and nodded, but said nothing. She clung tightly to Harry.

'I want all of you to go to bed,' said McGonagall. 'I've asked Madam Pomfrey to prescribe Dreamless Sleep Draughts to all of you if you feel you need it. You all need your rest, you especially, Potter. We'll know more in the morning.'

Bill glanced at Ron, then at Ginny. Ron made a move to start toward his older brother, but Bill shook his head. His face was a mask of exhaustion, concern...and something else. Ron wasn't sure how, but he suddenly knew that more had happened at the Ministry tonight than McGonagall or anyone else was letting on. Harry's vision had been fragmented and incomplete; he'd only seen Percy get attacked. But then Ron remembered that Harry had shouted Dumbledore's name before passing out. Had something happened to Dumbledore?

Madam Pomfrey passed around small vials of Dreamless Sleep Draught to each of them. Ron took his and decided to use it. He was exhausted but he knew that if he fell asleep without the potion in his system, he'd dream again. Dream of the sinister dark-haired witch who kept pulling him somewhere he didn't want to go.

The professors swept out of the hospital wing, and Ron and the others followed slowly behind them. Harry announced that he was going off with Susan, and Ron, Hermione and Ginny all mumbled and waved as he headed down the corridor in the direction of Hufflepuff. It was a testament to just how exhausted and shell-shocked they all were that Hermione didn't so much as look askance at Harry for his latest round of rule-breaking.

The three of them reached the Gryffindor common room and went inside through the portrait hole. It was very early in the morning by now and the sky was just beginning to lighten slightly in the distance. The fire had burned down to embers and the common room bore the look of having been cleaned by Dobby.

Ginny walked toward the fireplace, her face almost trance-like. She stood stiffly near the mantle and said nothing. Hermione exchanged a glance with Ron.

'Ginny,' said Ron. 'Are you okay?'

She said nothing for a moment.

'Gin--'

'Percy'll be okay,' said Ginny slowly, 'won't he, Ron?'

Ron swallowed. He wasn't sure what to say, because he didn't know what Ginny needed to hear. Usually she insisted on the truth, but tonight, maybe she needed reassurance. He chose reassurance.

'Sure he will, Gin,' he said, hoping he sounded firm.

'Don't just say that to be saying it,' said Ginny, turning to look at him.

‘I’m not,’ said Ron. ‘Dad said he’s okay. Hurt, but okay.’

Ginny nodded, swallowed. ‘I don’t know...how to feel about this.’

Ron took a step toward his sister, then another, and awkwardly put an arm round her. He hadn’t hugged her since she was twelve, in the aftermath of her possession by Voldemort. Back then he’d vowed to be a better older brother to her, but he knew he hadn’t really lived up to that promise, and they had grown apart. She had turned to the twins, or Bill, more often than not. But Bill and the twins weren’t here now. Bill was...wherever he was in the castle and the twins were, most likely, home at the Burrow with their mother. Ron’s big brother act had been limited to keeping a watchful eye over her boyfriends.

‘I don’t either, Gin,’ he admitted. Hermione took a step closer, but she didn’t intrude on them.

‘I mean, he’s such a git,’ said Ginny, and her eyes filled with tears. ‘After everything he did and said...I hated him. I really did.’

‘Me, too,’ said Ron. ‘But...but he’s still...

‘...our brother,’ Ginny finished.

Ron nodded. His arm was round Ginny’s shoulder and she leant against him. Ron looked at Hermione and extended his free hand, and she took it, saying nothing, and they stood that way, next to the fireplace, for several minutes.

After a while Ginny disentangled herself from Ron’s arm and announced she was turning in. Ron nodded and he and Hermione watched her ascend the girls’ staircase to her dormitory.

Ron's eyes lingered on the place Ginny had just been, until he felt Hermione looking at him.

'What?' he said.

'Nothing,' said Hermione, and she ran a hand through her hair, which was entirely back to its natural and unmanageable and beautiful state.

'Not nothing,' said Ron. 'What?'

'Nothing,' she repeated, more firmly, but she still wouldn't look at him. Ron didn't feel like arguing the point. He wanted to go to sleep.

'I'm turning in,' he said. 'Might as well try to get a few more hours sleep.' He fumbled with the vial of the sleeping draught.

'Are you sure you'll be okay?' said Hermione gently, taking his hand in hers.

'Yeah,' said Ron. 'I guess I'll find out more about Percy tomorrow, in the paper, right? I mean, he's...alive. And Dad says he's going to make it, so...so that's all we can do. Wait.'

Hermione said nothing, only nodded. She looked sad and conflicted about something. Ron was beyond exhausted, but he didn't want to leave her without knowing she was okay.

'Are you all right, Hermione?' he asked.

'I'm fine,' she said quickly. 'Just exhausted. You're right, we should go to sleep.'

He nodded, and kissed her on the forehead, then started toward his staircase. He was halfway up when he realized he hadn't heard her walking up her own staircase. He turned and saw her standing where he'd left her; her eyes were fixed on him and she looked scared and vulnerable.

'Hermione?' he said, his face screwing up in confusion. 'What's the matter?'

She flushed and looked down. 'I just...um...' Her voice trailed off.

'What?'

She looked back up at him. 'I just don't...want to be alone...'

Ron closed his eyes and felt his mind split in two; one part of him knew he should go to her and try to comfort her. The other part of him screamed to go to sleep and find some way to prepare himself for the bad news the morning would bring.

'Hermione, I...I'm so tired...' he said weakly.

'I know,' she said quickly, and her eyes filled with tears. 'I just...'

She took a deep breath. 'Can I...sleep with you?' she said, her voice so soft he almost didn't hear her.

'Wh-what?' he said.

She blushed even deeper and bit her lip and looked down at her feet.

‘Can I sleep with you?’ she said quickly. ‘Not...not that. Just go to sleep. I just...I don’t feel like being alone. Please, Ron...’

Ron swallowed. Part of him immediately thought it was a bad idea. Hermione, in his bed? How was he supposed to handle that? How was he supposed to keep his hands to himself and act like a gentleman when she was in his damn bed? She’d hardly so much as come into his room since they’d started dating.

But when he looked down at her and saw her eyes, huge and beautiful and shining with tears...

‘Okay,’ he heard himself say.

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They entered his room ten minutes later; Hermione had changed into her pyjamas and robe.

Ron was relieved to hear the quiet, measured breathing of Dean and Seamus and the snores of Neville.

‘They’re out,’ Ron whispered. ‘Um, we should make sure you...you know...can get out of here before they wake up.’

‘Right,’ said Hermione, and she suddenly looked very nervous. Ron wondered if she would change her mind. His initial resistance to the idea had vanished once he assured himself that he could control himself in such a situation. That, plus the enticing idea of waking up next to her, was enough to convince him. But she now seemed a bit reluctant.

‘Hermione,’ said Ron, ‘I promise...I won’t...we won’t do anything.’

Hermione blushed and looked at him, but she smiled and seemed to be reassured by this. ‘Okay.’

He smiled and quietly pulled back the curtains of his four poster. She looked at the bed for a moment, then at him, then back at the bed. She took a deep breath and pulled back the covers; then she undid the belt of her robe, pulled it off and dropped it in a small pile next to the bed, and climbed under the covers.

Ron bit back the urge to gulp. Now that she was IN his bed, all his self-assurance began to crumble. Maybe he should go sleep on the sofa.

‘Ron, are...are you going to get in?’ said Hermione softly.

‘Right,’ said Ron, and he, too, took a deep breath, crossed to the other side of the bed, and pulled back the covers. He quickly pulled off his robe and kicked off his slippers and climbed into the bed. They pulled the curtains closed, and they were suddenly...alone.

Ron noticed at once that the bed was really too small for two people. It was almost too small for him as it was, considering how tall he’d become. But with her in it he wasn’t sure how it was supposed to work.

But then she looked up at him and blushed, and he felt himself lift his arm up and put it round her shoulder. She gave a little sigh and snuggled up next to him and rested her head on his shoulder, configuring herself until she was neatly spooned up against him. Ron felt his heart begin to race a bit because of her closeness, the way she just seemed to fit perfectly against him.

She shifted slightly and wrapped her top leg over his left leg, and Ron swallowed. Her thigh was dangerously close to a certain area. She snuggled closer and her pyjama top hiked up in the back, exposing her skin.

‘Is this okay?’ she murmured, as she let her hand settle on his chest.

Ron swallowed. ‘Yes,’ he whispered. It was more than okay. It was horrible and wonderful all at once. He was mentally kicking himself for having promised not to try anything. He looked at the ceiling and felt his hand drift, almost of its own accord, to brush against the bare skin of her back. Before he knew it, he was gently stroking his fingers across her skin. Merlin, she was so soft. How did she get so soft? He shouldn’t be doing this. He couldn’t stop.

‘Mmm,’ she murmured. ‘That feels nice.’

‘Good,’ he heard himself say, and her top hitched just slightly higher, and she snuggled closer to him. He was unbearably grateful for the heavy bed coverings just then, that were hiding the evidence of his...good mood. And then he thought of the way he had touched her in the Quidditch tent and that certainly didn’t help things.

‘Good night,’ he heard her whisper. She lifted her head from the crook of his shoulder and planted a whisper-soft kiss on his cheek, then settled back down into his arms. Ron continued to stare up at the ceiling, debating whether or not he could get away with kissing her on the lips. His hand moved up her back, just a bit. His hand moved up another inch. She was pressed against him and the way she was lying next to him, he wasn’t sure if he could really get his hand where he wanted it to go. That part of her was a bit out of reach. But he couldn’t very well just touch her breast without warning. There was a proper way to do things; he knew that much.

One kiss, that’s all he really wanted. Okay, maybe a good, quick snog to settle his nerves. Or a good long snog. He was never too tired for that. And his hand was just really aching now to travel other places. Who was he kidding? His hand wasn’t the only thing aching. He’d made a promise not to do anything but...well, Hermione generally didn’t object to snogging when they were alone, and she was letting him do more stuff these days (well, not too much, but more than before), and a good snog would make her feel better, too...maybe other things he did would really make her feel better...

Ron was just about to shift on the bed and tilt her face up with his hand to kiss her when he stopped and noticed something. The slow, rhythmic sound of her breathing. He looked down and found her fast asleep, her head resting halfway on his shoulder,

half on his chest, her small hand resting right over his heart. Her hair was fanned out behind her and her lips were slightly parted. She looked...angelic.

‘Wow,’ Ron whispered. He was very uncomfortable at the moment but the sight of her sleeping touched him in a different way, and he realized he couldn’t bring himself to wake her up. He grimaced, trying to ease some of the discomfort he was feeling, and decided he’d have to live without a snog tonight. He pulled her pyjama top all the way back down and rested his hand on top of it, on her back. No sense tempting himself further.

He placed a kiss on her forehead and felt sleep steal over him. He closed his eyes, and as he began to drift he remembered the vial of Dreamless Sleep Draught on his nightstand. Perhaps he should take it. But then he heard Hermione sigh in her sleep and he decided he just didn’t want to move, not with her snuggled up to him. Maybe with her next to him, he’d have pleasant dreams for a change.

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Ron blinked and opened his eyes. He was lying on his back in his bed. A thin stream of sunlight hit the closed curtains of his four-poster, and cast a red glow.

He turned and started slightly. Hermione was next to him, sleeping soundly. She was still on her side and her hand was on his shoulder. He’d slept so hard, he had forgotten she was there.

He tried to remember his dreams, but he couldn’t. Just as well, he thought. He blinked again and looked at Hermione. Her hair was even more out of control this morning. It was like a living thing, spread all over the pillow and falling in her face. He grinned and reached over to brush a few curls out of her eyes. She stirred and opened her eyes.

‘Ron,’ she said softly. She blushed.

Ron, too, felt his cheeks get hot, and he couldn't quite figure out why. They hadn't DONE anything, after all. They were both fully clothed, albeit in pyjamas. They had simply fallen asleep together. It was perfectly innocent, wasn't it?

And yet something told Ron that this was different. Hermione was in his bed. It was an entirely off-limits place for her to be. She bit her lip.

'Oh dear,' she said.

'What?' said Ron, moving closer to her, without really noticing he was doing it.

'Just...' she said. 'How'd you sleep?'

'Really good,' he said. 'I mean, really well. You?'

'Very well,' she said. She bit her lip again, and looked very embarrassed about something.

'What?' said Ron again, moving still closer to her. He took her hand in his.

'Does this mean...I'm a...a scarlet woman?' Hermione asked in a tiny voice. Ron couldn't help it. He laughed. She looked so serious and scared but her words were so...funny.

'Ron!' she said angrily, and she turned away from him.

'I'm sorry!' he said quickly, and he moved up close to her and spooned her. 'Don't be mad, 'Mione, it's just...I mean, I don't think that. No way.'

She turned back to him. 'Really?'

'Really,' he said. 'I...I liked it. I mean, you being here. All night...and everything.'

She paused, bit her lip, then smiled shyly. 'I liked it, too.'

She was very close to him and his heart was pounding. They did nothing for a long moment, just looked at one another. And then she leaned in and kissed him lightly on the lips, and that was it. Suddenly, the full implications of having Hermione in his bed came roaring to life, and Ron pulled her to him and kissed her back, fervently.

They snogged for several minutes, and Ron felt like his whole body was going to explode from it. He didn't care about morning breath, or that his hair was sticking up in all directions. He didn't care about anything but her. He moved to kiss her neck and his hands went to where they'd wanted to go last night and she had no bra on and, oh, Merlin, it was so soft and wonderful and he heard her say his name. No, *moan* his name. Bloody hell. She shifted and climbed over him. Bloody hell again. He'd never dreamed he'd ever start a day off like this; it certainly beat Quidditch practice. She settled onto him and things really began to spin. If they didn't stop...but he didn't want to stop. His brain hummed. Maybe he could caress her like he had the other night. Maybe they could finally--

'Attention, please. All students please dress and report to the Great Hall at once. All students, report to the Great Hall.'

Ron felt Hermione jerk her mouth away from his and look up. She was lying fully on top of him and her pyjama top was again hiked up in the back.

'What was that?'

Ron had only vaguely heard it. Something about going to the Great Hall. Whatever. It could wait. His brain was barely functioning. Continuing what they were doing was so much more important now than anything else...

‘Nothing, c’mere,’ he heard himself say, and he pulled her down for another long kiss. His hands pushed her top up bit further in the back. All she had to do was raise her arms and he could pull it completely off and he could finally see what he’d touched.

‘All students, report to the Great Hall immediately.’

McGonagall’s voice boomed through the dormitory.

‘Shite,’ said Ron angrily, as Hermione pulled her lips away from his once again.

‘Ron, don’t swear, and you know we have to stop,’ she hissed, pulling her top back down. So close. He’d nearly seen--

He groaned and covered his face with his hands.

‘Don’t be that way,’ said Hermione. ‘We have to go. Or have you forgotten about Percy already?’

Percy. Ron HAD forgotten. Ron pretty much forgot everything else when he was in Full Snog Mode with Hermione. Only this time he had been in Full Snog Mode Plus Nearly Getting Her Top Off.

Now, however, he felt horrible. His brother had been badly hurt and he, Ron, was more worried about making out with his girlfriend. Guilt stabbed at his gut.

‘Sorry,’ he heard himself mumble, and he sat up. ‘Sorry. You’re right. I’m being...a selfish arse.’

‘It’s...it’s okay,’ said Hermione, and she gave him a small smile that made him feel a bit less like a selfish, randy git. ‘And don’t swear,’ she added, taking his hand.

He smiled sheepishly at her, then shook his head to clear it and reached for the curtains.

But they were yanked open by somebody else.

‘Hey, wake up Weasley!’ said Seamus, but then his eyes fell on Hermione and he stopped. His mouth was open, and Dean and Neville were behind him. All three of them stared at Ron, then at Hermione, then back at Ron.

‘Uh...’ said Ron dumbly. Shit. He’d never hear the end of it.

Hermione made a noise in her throat, but then seemed to snap out of something.

‘Well, what are you three staring at?’ she snapped. ‘McGonagall wants us in the Great Hall. So get dressed!’ She leapt out of Ron’s bed, put on her slippers, and flipped her hair out of her eyes. ‘And be quick about it!’ she added, before flouncing out of the room. Ron and the other boys stared after her for a good few seconds before Seamus chuckled.

‘Weasley, you dog--’

‘Finnigan, don’t say a word if you know what’s good for you,’ said Ron, whirling on him. His face was hot, his ears were red, but he wasn’t going to stand for Seamus teasing him.

Seamus held up his hands and backed away. Ron shot a glance at Dean, who quickly busied himself with getting dressed. Then Ron looked at Neville, who was, if possible, even more crimson in the face. Neville looked away and he, too, began to pull on his school uniform.

Ron was just pulling on his school robes when Harry burst into the room and began to tear clothes out of the drawers of his chest.

‘Shit,’ he muttered. ‘Shit, shit, shit.’

‘What?’ said Ron.

‘What do you mean, what?’ said Harry irritably. ‘If McGonagall wants us in the Great Hall, something’s happened. Something bad.’

‘Yeah,’ said Ron, feeling a bit annoyed. ‘We heard about it last night.’

‘Not everything,’ said Harry, as he pulled on socks and shoes.

Ron nodded. ‘Yeah, not everything. I guess...we’re about to find out, aren’t we?’

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The Great Hall filled quickly, but nobody sat down, and conversations buzzed throughout the room. Harry and Susan stood nearby, holding onto each other.

As he clutched Hermione’s hand, Ron felt his eyes wander about the room. So far nearly every face he’d seen had been a mixture of expressions: concern, confusion, fear.

‘Hey,’ said Ginny, as she took a seat to Ron’s left. ‘What’s going on?’

'I dunno,' said Ron, as his eyes continued to wander. They fell upon Luna Lovegood, who was perhaps the only student actually sitting down. Ron bit back a gasp at her appearance. She was thin to the point of being gaunt. Her dark blonde hair hung in limp ropes down her back. Her normally protuberant eyes were huge as saucers, but heavy-lidded, with deep purple circles beneath. Her face was ashen. She looked as though she hadn't slept or eaten in a week.

'Luna looks like hell,' Ron whispered to Ginny.

'I know,' said Ginny. 'I think it must be the book. She's not sleeping.'

At that moment Eddie Carmichael appeared at Luna's side and put a hand on her shoulder. Luna looked up and smiled weakly at him, and Eddie sat down next to her and took her hand. His face was surprisingly gentle and lacked any of its usual leering smarminess; he seemed to be trying to comfort her about something. Luna was nodding and clutching his hand.

'Look,' Ron hissed, to Hermione and Ginny.

'Ron, he could just be trying to calm her down about...whatever McGonagall's called us in here for,' said Hermione quickly.

'If you say so,' said Ron doubtfully. At that moment a screech owl came soaring into the hall and dropped something in front of Hermione. It took off without bothering to accept payment for the delivery.

'*The Prophet*,' Hermione breathed. She snatched up the paper. Harry and Susan came round behind Hermione as Ron and Ginny moved closer to her.

'Front page story about the attack last night,' said Hermione in a whisper. 'Look.'

And they did. Neville looked up and joined them. Ron felt his stomach clench as he read the article.

ATTACK AT MINISTRY LEADS TO CHAOS, INJURIES

At least a dozen Death Eaters--supporters of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named lead an attack against the Ministry of Magic in the early hours of the morning. With the help of several Dementors, former prison guards of Azkaban who have since deserted Ministry employ and joined the ranks of You-Know-Who's minions, the Death Eaters entered Ministry headquarters at approximately one-thirty in the morning. It is believed that one of the Death Eaters posed as a Ministry employee and gained entrance to headquarters via subterfuge, then assisted his comrades in entering the building through the front door.

No documents or valuables were stolen from Ministry headquarters or the Department of Mysteries, leading top Ministry officials to believe that the attack was not a robbery attempt. 'It was clearly designed to foment chaos and panic,' said one unnamed Ministry official.

Ministry employees from the highest levels on down have been working very long hours and additional shifts in a concerted effort to recapture the four escaped Death Eaters who absconded from Azkaban prison several months ago. The Death Eaters are Lucius Malfoy, Augustus Rookwood, Antonin Dolohov and Bellatrix Lestrange. Witnesses to last night's attack were unable to determine if any of these four Death Eaters were among those who participated in the attack, as all of the Death Eaters were hooded and masked.

Several injuries, some serious, have been reported.

Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, sustained serious injuries when he was ambushed on his way out of the Department of Mysteries. The nature of his injuries is unclear but he is currently at St. Mungo's Hospital and his condition is listed as 'serious.'

Amelia Bones, Acting Minister of Magic, was gravely injured by two Death Eaters who attacked her as she entered the Atrium to assist Ministry employees in defending against the Death Eater Attack. She is expected to make a full recovery but a St. Mungo's healer, speaking on condition of anonymity, says 'it'll be some time before she can return to her post.'

Another Ministry employee, Percy Ignatius Weasley, was badly injured in the attack; witnesses say three Death Eaters used a Reductor Curse that caused a large section of wall to collapse upon Mr. Weasley, severely injuring both his legs. He nonetheless fought off his attackers, killing one and causing the other two to flee. Mr. Weasley's heroics did not end there, however. Witnesses claim that he was chased by the three Death Eaters after successfully repelling half a dozen Dementors who were attempting to attack his father, Arthur Weasley, of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office. Mr. Weasley, Sr. was uninjured in the attack. Percy Weasley has also been removed to St. Mungo's for treatment. Like Madam Bones, Percy Weasley is expected to make a full recovery but hospital officials caution that the damage to his legs is severe enough that there might be some permanent damage.

Several other Ministry employees received minor injuries in the attack. They were treated at St. Mungo's and released. Additional Aurors have been posted on all floors at the hospital to protect the patients; these Aurors join the small force who were stationed at the hospital to guard six Death Eaters who subsequently escaped by means of subterfuge and, it is believed, with assistance from fellow Death Eaters. Apart from the Death Eater killed by Percy Weasley, all of the Death Eaters involved in this morning's attack, as well as most of the Dementors, fled the scene. The attack lasted less than fifteen minutes and also caused severe damage to the Ministry building itself.

In the aftermath of the attack an emergency session of the Wizengamot was called this morning. Minerva McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts, attended the meeting in Dumbledore's stead. She will assume the post of Interim Headmistress until Dumbledore recovers and returns to the school. Details are sketchy as to the content of the Wizengamot meeting, but The Daily Prophet has confirmed that Arthur Weasley has been temporarily appointed as Acting Minister of Magic until Madam Bones returns to her post.

Everyone seemed to finish reading at the same time, and the five of them stared at one another.

Hermione found her voice first.

‘I...I can’t believe it,’ she said. ‘Dumbledore...’

‘Ron, your dad,’ said Neville. ‘Minister of Magic?’

Somehow, this news was no comfort to Ron at all, and Susan blanched.

Neville seemed to realize he’d said something wrong, and he mumbled, ‘Sorry.’

And then there were more owls swooping in, and more copies of *The Daily Prophet* were dropping, onto tables, onto students’ heads, and very soon the horrified expressions on Ron’s, Hermione’s, Harry’s, Ginny’s and Susan’s faces were matched by most everyone in the room.

Most everyone, Ron saw, except for Malfoy. As Ron’s eyes flitted over to the Slytherin table, he saw Malfoy staring at him. Or more correctly, them.

‘Malfoy,’ Ron heard himself say, and Harry turned. Ron felt his blood run cold when Malfoy’s thin lips curled into a smug, sneering smile.

‘He knows,’ said Ron. ‘He knows what happened.’ His eyes stayed on Malfoy, wanting to out-glare the blond boy.

‘Of course he knows,’ said Harry darkly. ‘His dad was probably there.’

‘Attention, please!’

McGonagall’s voice snapped Ron’s eyes away from Malfoy, and a hush fell over the Great Hall. McGonagall stood in front of the staff table, flanked on one side by Snape, Professor Sprout, Professor Sinistra, Professor Vector and Hagrid. On the other side were Bill, Madam Pomfrey, Professor Flitwick, and the ghostly, pearlescent shape of Professor Binns.

‘By now I’m sure many of you have read this morning’s paper,’ said McGonagall. Her voice was steely but slightly tired. ‘I regret to say that the report is entirely accurate. Albus Dumbledore was indeed gravely injured in last night’s attack, and he is in hospital.’

A great murmur went up in the crowd.

‘Silence, please!’ said McGonagall, and as Ron expected, the hall fell silent. ‘I have called this assembly to announce several new security procedures, but first and foremost I want to emphasize that nobody should panic. Our Headmaster is alive and he is recuperating, and he will return as soon as he is able. In the meantime, I have been given special dispensation by the Ministry of Magic to install additional security in and around the school.’

It was then that Ron noticed several new faces in the room. All of them young. All of them Aurors, judging by their robes and badges.

‘As of today all students will be escorted to and from lessons in groups by teams of two Aurors. All students will report to their house common rooms no later than six o’clock each evening. No exceptions. Prefects and the Head Boy and Girl will continue with their patrol duties in the company of at least one Auror, at all times. No exceptions. Prefects and the Head Boy and Girl are given dispensation to use magic in the corridors in emergency situations only. All trips to Hogsmeade are hereby cancelled. No exceptions. The Floo Network has been temporarily suspended. Any student who, for any reason, needs to leave the school, must arrange to do so by Portkey, and must make arrangements through my office. Security trolls will be patrolling the grounds. Students are advised not to disturb them under any circumstances.’

Ron smirked. Having dealt with a mountain troll in his first year, he knew better than to go anywhere near the beasts.

‘In the meantime, all other activities will go on as normal,’ McGonagall was saying. ‘We will hold the final Quidditch match of the season but please be prepared for very tight security. I will give more details on this as the time approaches. In the meantime, please finish your breakfast and prepare to go to lessons. We will be lining classes up shortly, by year, so that you can be escorted where you need to go.’

At this, McGonagall swept up to the staff table and around it, and took a seat. Ron noticed she did not sit in Dumbledore’s chair, though it was her right as Acting Headmistress. Snape, for his part, walked quickly from the Great Hall. Bill strode over to the Gryffindor table.

‘Ron, Ginny,’ he said, his voice flat and tired. ‘Read about Percy?’

‘Yeah,’ said Ron, his glum feeling returning.

‘Mum wants me to pop in and see him,’ said Bill. ‘I reckon I’m going this afternoon. Which means lessons are cancelled for today, but McGonagall’s agreed that you can hold a D.A. meeting instead, and I’d like for Harry to lead it and for you, Ron, to assist. Harry?’

‘Sure,’ said Harry at once. ‘Yeah, I’ll do it.’

‘Me, too,’ said Ron, feeling a twinge in his chest. He suddenly wished he could go to St. Mungo’s, too, just to see for himself if Percy was all right.

You’ll be all right while I’m gone?’ said Bill.

‘Yeah, fine,’ said Ron and Ginny together.

‘Right,’ said Bill. ‘See you later then.’ He started off, but Ron called out to him.

‘Bill?’

‘Yeah?’ said Bill, turning.

‘Listen, um, when you see Percy,’ said Ron slowly, and he looked to Ginny for help, and she nodded, ‘just...just tell him we’re glad he’s okay.’

Bill gave Ron a small smile. ‘I’ll do that,’ he said, and swept out of the room.

For a long moment, nobody left at the table spoke. At last, Harry piped up.

‘I’m glad...Percy’s okay,’ he said. ‘That was brave, what he did.’

‘Yeah,’ said Ron dully, not wanting to talk about the brother who only yesterday he was still angry with. It was a lot easier to be annoyed with Percy than to be worried about him.

‘Do--do you--well, we were supposed to have Quidditch practice tonight, but if you don’t want to--’ Harry stammered.

‘No, I want to,’ said Ron. ‘We’ve got the match on Saturday. Gin, you okay with that?’

‘Yes,’ said Ginny at once.

‘All right, then,’ said Harry. ‘It’s on.’

‘Attention, please,’ said McGonagall. ‘First years, please line up single-file by the entrance doors to the Hall to be escorted to class.’

‘Damn,’ said Harry. ‘Was hoping to have time for a kip before lessons.’

‘Oh, did you have trouble sleeping again, Harry?’ said Hermione, her face full of worry.

Harry went red, and Ron immediately knew why Harry hadn’t slept much the night before. The blush on Susan’s face confirmed it.

‘Not really,’ Harry mumbled. ‘But it was nothing. No visions. No big deal.’

‘Are you sure, Harry?’ said Hermione. ‘Maybe you should go to Madam Pomfrey--’

Harry was beet red and Ron knew he had to step in before Hermione really caused embarrassment. For someone who prided herself on being so attuned to other people’s emotions, she could be a bit naïve.

‘Drop it, Hermione,’ he whispered. She opened her mouth, gave him an indignant look, but then nodded.

‘Second years, line up please!’ McGonagall called. And on it went, until they reached the sixth years. Ron and Hermione headed to the front of the line while Harry drifted back a bit with Susan. Malfoy smiled smugly as Ron passed, but this time Hermione didn’t even have to tell Ron to ignore the other boy; Ron was too tired, too wound up, too concerned for his brother to notice the little ferret.

‘Wotcher, Ron, Hermione,’ said a friendly female voice. Ron looked up into the pale face of Nymphadora Tonks.

‘Hey, Tonks,’ said Ron, grinning. ‘You volunteered for this?’

‘You bet,’ she said, and she nodded toward Harry, who nodded back in greeting. ‘Wanted to keep an eye on Harry, and I figure he’ll prefer me to Mad-Eye.’

Their first lesson was Transfiguration. Ron did well enough in the lesson that day, all things considered. McGonagall had offered to let him take the day off, but Ron decided that keeping busy was better for him, and for once his mind stayed totally on the task at hand: Conjuring Spells. Ron was getting fairly decent with these, though his chairs were always a bit misshapen and his table legs a bit too short. Hermione, as usual, conjured up perfect bits of furniture and earned Gryffindor twenty points. Harry’s furniture was about as good as Ron’s, but neither of them were required to do extra homework for once.

After Transfiguration, there was the lunch hour, and Ron’s mind drifted back to Percy as he wandered slowly back to the Great Hall with Hermione. He wondered if Bill had already left to see him. He remembered the last time he’d seen Percy. At Christmas, when he’d yelled at Percy and threw every nasty thing Percy had done back in his face.

He deserved it, Ron thought.

True, but he also nearly died trying to save our dad. And his legs...would Percy ever walk again?

Suddenly, it seemed to Ron to be the most petty thing in the world to hold any sort of grudge against Percy. Ron had nearly lost his father and his brother in the past year and a half. Charlie was right. They should all be sticking together. They shouldn’t hold onto grudges. Any one of them could die in this stupid war. Ron swallowed and fought down a lump in his throat.

‘Ron?’ said Hermione. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Yeah,’ Ron said quickly. ‘Listen, uh, I need to do something right now. Can I meet you after lunch?’

‘Ron, you’re not supposed to go round in the corridors alone,’ said Hermione fretfully.

‘I’ll grab somebody to walk me,’ said Ron, trying not to sound impatient. ‘And anyway, I’m going to the common room, okay? I just...I really have to do something.’

She studied him for a moment, perplexed, but something in his face must have made sense to her, and she nodded.

‘See you soon, then,’ she said. ‘I’ll save you a sandwich.’

‘Thanks,’ he said, and he hugged her tightly and kissed her on the head, and hurried off in the direction of the common room.

‘Weasley, where are you--‘

‘Professor McGonagall,’ said Ron. ‘Look, is it okay if I just go to the common room? I just...I need to write Percy.’

McGonagall eyed him for a moment, then nodded.

‘Of course, Mr. Weasley,’ she said. ‘But go straight to the common room and don’t wander, understood?’

‘Yes, Professor,’ he said, and he hurried off, leaving her shaking her head and smiling in his wake.

It was almost an hour before the letter he was composing was deemed satisfactory, and by that point the lunch hour was nearing completion. Harry was sacked out on his bed, sleeping deeply; he’d managed to get Tonks to walk him back to the common

room. Ron smirked and wondered when his best mate had turned into such a randy bastard.

As for Ron, he was hungry and cranky. Nearly an hour to write a very short letter. What else was new?

Dear Percy,

I heard about what happened at the Ministry. I'm glad you're okay and I just want to say that you were really brave, and to say thanks for helping Dad. I'm sorry I was angry at you at Christmas. Write soon and let me know how you're doing.

Best,

Ron

Ron stared down at the letter for a moment, then rolled up the parchment, sealed it with a tap of his wand, and whistled to Pigwidgeon, who was snoozing in his cage. The tiny owl blinked and gave a little hoot.

‘Shh, don't wake Harry,’ Ron said, crossing to the cage and opening it. Pigwidgeon immediately started to flutter excitedly. ‘Calm down, silly bird. Take this to St. Mungo's, got it? Make sure Percy gets it.’

Pigwidgeon gave a loud, happy hoot, took the parchment in his right claw and fluttered out of his cage. Ron rolled his eyes but opened the window and watched as the tiny owl flew away unsteadily, the letter clutched tightly in his claw.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Wandless Magic

‘Ready for the D.A. meeting?’ said Ron, as he straightened his tie and ran a hand through his hair. They were holding the meeting at eight o’clock, a time later than curfew, but only because McGonagall had approved it, and only because there would be a dozen Aurors there for security.

‘I guess,’ said Harry. ‘I’m bloody tired, though. I dunno why I agreed to it. How the hell am I supposed to concentrate on what I’m doing, let alone lead a meeting?’

‘I’ll help you out,’ said Ron, trying to sound more confident than he really felt. Unlike Harry, he had no confidence in his leadership abilities. But he’d given Bill his word...

Harry pulled on his shoes and glasses and then the dormitory door creaked open and Seamus, Dean and Neville walked in.

Ron grimaced as Seamus and Dean gave him wicked, knowing smiles.

‘Hey, Weasley,’ said Seamus. ‘Hermione’s not hiding anywhere in here, is she?’

‘Knock it off,’ said Ron, rolling his eyes.

‘What does that mean?’ said Harry, pulling on his robes.

‘Hermione slept here last night,’ Neville blurted. Harry’s jaw dropped.

‘Thanks, Neville,’ Ron groaned.

Neville went scarlet in the face. 'Oh...hell. Sorry, Ron.'

'Yeah,' said Seamus, chuckling. 'Imagine our surprise when we found the prefects in a clinch--'

'Seamus, don't you have something else you could be doing right now?' said Ron menacingly.

'Not really,' said Seamus, who was smiling.

'Drop it, Seamus,' Dean muttered.

'Look, maybe you guys can go down and set things up for the D.A. meeting, in the Great Hall,' said Harry quickly. 'I could use your help on that.'

Seamus shrugged, but he seemed to get the hint. 'All right. Sure.'

'See you down there,' said Dean, a bit sheepishly. Neville was still bright red and his lips were pursed in embarrassment as he followed the other two boys out of the dormitory, leaving Ron and Harry alone again.

For a long moment, neither of them said anything. Harry seemed to be making quite a fuss over his tie, when he finally spoke.

'Is that true?' he asked. 'About Hermione.'

'Yeah, it's true,' said Ron. 'But we didn't DO anything, okay? I mean, yeah, we SLEPT together, in the literal sense, and...we had a good snog this morning, but that's it.'

‘Okay,’ said Harry, holding up his hands. ‘Are you planning on, uh, sleeping together--in the literal sense--again?’

‘Dunno,’ said Ron, looking down at his feet. ‘If she wants, I guess. I mean...it was nice. Waking up next to her.’

Ron felt, rather than saw, Harry nod, and they said nothing for a moment. Then Harry cleared his throat.

‘Let’s get down to the Great Hall, yeah?’ he said.

‘Right,’ said Ron, bringing his mind to the task nearly at hand. They started out of the dormitory, checking for their wands as they went. As they headed out the door, Harry spoke.

‘That’s my favourite part,’ he said.

‘What is?’

‘The waking up part,’ said Harry.

Ron looked at him dubiously. ‘Even better than sex?’

Harry flushed and grinned. ‘Yeah. I mean, that part’s always good but the waking up part? It’s like...the icing on the cake. Or something.’

‘I don’t wanna hear about you and Susan and icing, you dirty great perv,’ said Ron, punching Harry in the arm.

‘Shut it,’ said Harry, still grinning. ‘When you finally get around to having sex maybe you’ll know what I’m talking about.’

‘Piss off!’ said Ron, a bit more sharply than he’d meant to. Harry immediately seemed to realize he’d gone a bit too far.

‘Sorry, mate,’ he said quickly. ‘I didn’t mean--’

‘Forget it,’ said Ron, and he shook his head. ‘Didn’t mean to bite your head off. It’s just...never mind. Let’s go to the meeting, okay?’

Harry started to speak, but seemed to think better of it, and simply nodded, and together they left the dormitory.

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Ron said little as he helped Harry and his other dorm mates set up the Great Hall for the D.A. meeting. Several Aurors, including Tonks (her hair was short and blue tonight), were positioned in various points round the room. He saw Hermione and she gave him a soft smile, and he smiled back, but then he remembered what Harry had said and he felt his mood darken again.

It was silly, Ron knew, to be upset about sex. Or more accurately, about the fact that he hadn’t had it yet. Hermione wasn’t ready. But he couldn’t help but wish she’d hurry up and GET ready. He had loved having her in his bed last night, curled up next to him, but it was just so frustrating at the same time. And the feelings of frustration lead to feelings of guilt. He didn’t WANT to want her so badly, in that way, but he did. He wanted to be a good, considerate boyfriend, and so far, for the most part, he’d done a decent job of that. But...he was human, wasn’t he? She drove him crazy. He wondered if she ever got as hot and bothered as he did.

And then he thought about that morning, and he wondered just how far things might have gone had McGonagall not interrupted them. There was something different about what had happened this morning; Hermione had seemed more willing to go further. Or had she? He couldn't really KNOW what she wanted at the time. Maybe she would have stopped him, after all. And of course, it didn't help that on top of this was Ron's guilt over Percy. His brother was laid up in hospital with shattered legs, and Ron was more concerned with getting his girlfriend's pyjama top off.

All in all, he hated all these jumbled feelings, and he wished there were a way to deal with them that didn't involve the usual...remedies. It wasn't easy sharing a room with four other blokes who were probably at least as randy as he was. Okay, maybe not Harry, who was getting some, but as far as Ron knew, none of the other boys in his dorm were. Or at least, he hoped not. He'd hate to be the only one who wasn't getting any.

And then Hermione smiled at him again, and the guilt returned. He should be happy with what he had. She was the best girl ever, and it wasn't like she wasn't letting him do anything. And maybe, if McGonagall hadn't interrupted them, he would have gotten her top off and he could have finally looked at her, assuming she'd have let him. Which she hadn't yet. It was a bit weird, really, he thought, that she'd let him touch her but not look at her.

'Can everyone quiet down, please?'

Harry's voice snapped Ron out of his own jumbled thoughts, and he looked up. Harry was standing on the dais in front of the staff table.

Gradually, the murmuring voices died down, and Ron allowed his eyes to take in the many faces in the room. All the usual D.A. members were there, but Ron was none too pleased to see Malfoy and his Slytherin contingent there as well. In fact, Ron didn't like it at all. Without Bill there to supervise, Malfoy and his cronies could easily cause trouble. Ron turned to Harry and met his eyes and nodded his head just slightly in the Slytherins' direction, and Harry nodded back. He understood.

'In lieu of a lesson today,' Harry said, 'Professor Weasley asked me to run a D.A. meeting, so we can keep up with our practical defence.'

At this, Malfoy and his minions sniggered, but quietly. Ron shot them a furious look, and felt a warm hand on his arm. He turned to see Hermione looking up at him anxiously.

‘They won’t try anything with Aurors here,’ she said, but she didn’t sound convinced about that herself.

‘Let’s pair up,’ said Harry loudly. ‘Professor Weasley had us working on wandless magic, in particular the Defensive Charge. Let’s give that a go, yeah?’

A murmur went up in the crowd; clearly, nobody had been expecting to practice this.

‘Excuse me,’ said the grating voice of Zacharias Smith. ‘Do you think it’s WISE to practice this spell without a teacher’s supervision?’

Harry bristled, just slightly, but he kept his cool. ‘Professor Weasley put me in charge, Smith. If you don’t want to be here, you know where the door is.’

Smith scowled, but said nothing.

‘Wands away, then,’ said Harry, looking pointedly at the Slytherins. Everyone complied, but Malfoy gave a sneer and he put his wand back in his robe pocket.

And with that, everyone went to work. Ron had difficulty concentrating, because his eyes kept wandering over to the Slytherins.

‘Ron, you can’t expect to throw the charge if you’re not focusing!’ said Hermione irritably, as she gripped his arms and waited for him to focus his energy on producing the electric current in his body.

‘Sorry,’ he grumbled. ‘I just...bloody Malfoy.’

‘Ignore them,’ said Hermione firmly.

‘Right,’ said Ron, and he forced himself to focus on what he was doing. Wandless magic was very difficult; even fully trained wizards found it challenging. At least, that’s what Bill had told them, and as far as Ron was concerned, Bill was one of the most capable wizards around, especially for being so relatively young. A wand made casting spells easier because it focused the spell. Wandless magic often produced haphazard or undesired results. Like when Harry had blown up his aunt back before their third year. But wandless magic was always a useful skill to learn. One couldn’t always count on having a wand.

‘Ready?’ said Hermione, and she stood behind Ron and wrapped her arms tightly round his waist, pinning his arms.

‘Yeah,’ said Ron, trying not to let his mind wander as a result of her being pressed up against him. ‘You realize I could shake you off without the magic, of course.’

‘Yes, yes, I know how big and strong you are,’ said Hermione, in her best annoyed/affectionate voice. ‘Just humour me, okay? Please? You can do this.’

‘Right,’ said Ron, and he took a deep breath and drew his mind inward. He focused on Hermione’s grip round his arms, pinning them to his sides. For someone so small, she did have a strong grip on him. She’d never beat him in an arm wrestling match, but she wasn’t a delicate little thing either, even if she seemed so small next to him. He felt the strength of her arms and hands as she clutched him, and suddenly he could feel his blood, and hers, pounding through their veins. He focused on her arms, and the blood pumping through them, and closed his eyes and thought to himself, ‘Let go!’

A sharp buzz shot through his body. Hermione gasped and released him, jerking away from him as though she’d touched a hot stove. Ron opened his eyes and blinked.

‘Whoa,’ he said. ‘That was intense.’

‘It worked,’ said Hermione, and she grinned. ‘You did it.’

Ron grinned back. Okay, so maybe he wasn’t complete rubbish at wandless magic after all.

‘My turn,’ said Hermione eagerly, and he nodded and stepped behind her and put his arms round her, pinning her arms at her side. His arms were just below her breasts and he held her to him and tried to think of anything OTHER than what he was doing, because this position was a bit intimate.

‘Okay, ready?’ said Hermione.

‘Sure,’ Ron heard himself say. He watched the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed.

Focus, Weasley, he thought. How on earth did she do this to him?

Suddenly he felt another current race through his body; it was sharp and painful and he let go of her with a jerk, stumbling back just slightly. The pulse she’d created was even more powerful than his, and she’d taken half the time to work the charge. He didn’t know whether to be impressed or jealous.

‘Wow,’ he said, settling for impressed. Well, she was better at most of this stuff, anyway. He was used to it by now. ‘That was a good one.’

‘Thanks,’ said Hermione. ‘I’ve been practicing that one.’

‘Of course,’ said Ron, smiling. ‘I kind of like that one.’

‘Why?’ said Hermione, but then her eyes narrowed. ‘Ron, you pig.’ But she smiled and blushed, just a little. And suddenly Ron very much wanted to leave the stupid D.A. meeting and take her back to his dorm and to his bed and continue where they’d left off that morning.

‘Mione,’ he said. ‘Um, do you think...that is, are you interested in maybe--‘

But Ron’s request for Hermione to sleep over again was cut off when a loud yell pierced through the room. Ron and Hermione looked up to see none other than Eddie Carmichael go flying halfway across the room to land in a heap.

‘Stop!’ Harry yelled, and he jumped down from the dais and headed over to Eddie. Everyone else stopped what they were doing and watched.

‘You okay, Carmichael?’ Harry asked, extending a hand to help the Head Boy up.

‘Fine,’ said Eddie, sounding rankled. ‘Fine.’ He shook off Harry’s hand and stood up on his own, and for a brief moment his eyes met Ron’s. Ron felt his blood go cold. Eddie’s eyes were like icy slate, full of something Ron couldn’t quite place. But it was the same awful, unpleasant thing he’d seen a few weeks ago, when Eddie had helped Luna with her schoolbag. Something off. Ron wished there was a word he could find to describe it.

In the next instant Eddie’s eyes moved away, and Ron followed the Head Boy’s gaze. He was looking at Luna Lovegood. And in the next moment, so was everyone else in the room. Clearly, Eddie and Luna had paired up.

Luna was staring at Eddie with a horrified expression on her face. Eddie grinned at her.

‘Good one, Luna,’ he said, but his smile didn’t reach his eyes, and his voice sounded tight. ‘I never knew you were so good at wandless magic.’

Luna's eyes were huge and she swallowed, and her mouth moved like a fish out of water. She tried to say something, but instead a choked sound came out of her throat. She shook her head, and her eyes filled with tears.

'Hey, hey,' said Eddie, glancing nervously round the room. 'It's okay. I'm fine.' He put a hand on her shoulder.

Her reaction was as if he'd done a Defensive Charge on her. She jerked away from him, gave a kind of strangled cry, and ran from the room, shoving past several Ravenclaws and a few Hufflepuffs on her way out. Tonks snapped her fingers and nodded to a young, sandy-haired Auror, who followed Luna out.

Malfoy and his cronies burst into laughter.

'Looks like Loony's having another "episode",' Malfoy said snidely, and this comment was greeted with sycophantic laughter from Crabbe, Goyle, Blaise Zabini, Theodore Nott, Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode.

'Shut up, Malfoy,' said a sharp female voice, and Ron was surprised to see it was Ginny. Without a backward glance she started to storm out of the hall, shoving Malfoy roughly out of her way. Malfoy snarled and pulled out his wand to point it at her, but in the next instant the Slytherins were surrounded not only by other D.A. members, but by a few Aurors as well, and Nymphadora Tonks stepped coolly forward, put her hand on Malfoy's arm, and pushed it down. Malfoy resisted slightly, but she gripped his arm hard, and gave it a hard shove.

'I'd put that away, Malfoy,' she said. 'You're liable to hurt someone.'

Ginny was still moving toward the door, and Tonks, without taking her arms off Malfoy, called, 'Ginny. Stay where you are.'

Malfoy glowered at her, then at Tonks, and rubbed at his arm. 'I'd better go wash this arm,' he said. 'Now it's been contaminated with Mudblood germs.'

'Ouch, that hurt,' said Tonks sarcastically. 'Who writes your material, Draco? Those two lunkheads?' And she indicated Crabbe and Goyle.

Malfoy scowled and started to open his mouth to say something, but Tonks cut him off and spoke in a ringing voice.

'This session of the D.A. is over,' she called. 'Students line up and get ready to be escorted back to your common rooms.'

And with that, the meeting was over. The students obeyed and lined up as instructed, with Eddie and Katie leading the pack, and the prefects leading their houses. Harry embraced Susan quickly before she joined the other Hufflepuffs. Ron felt Hermione take his hand and the two of them lead the Gryffindors out of the Great Hall and back to the common room. Hermione exchanged several worried looks with Ron, and Ron knew exactly what she was thinking about: what had happened between Luna and Eddie. Luna had thrown such a powerful Defensive Charge, it sent Eddie flying across the room. And then, she'd fled the Great Hall in tears.

The students filed slowly into the common room, with Ron and Hermione bringing up the rear, just behind Harry, Ginny and Neville. Hermione headed straight to the corner of the room, closest to the fireplace, and appeared to wait for everyone to go up to their dormitories. Neville took a seat by the fire; Ginny fell into one of the squishy arm-chairs; Harry stood next to the mantle.

For a long moment nobody spoke.

Hermione looked agitated, and she kept shooting glances at Neville. It was obvious what she wanted to do: to talk about what had happened with Luna, to see if Ginny knew anything about what had happened. But they couldn't involve Neville.

Finally, Hermione cleared her throat and said, as gently as she could, 'Um, Neville, do you think you could...just excuse Ron and Harry and Ginny and me?'

'What?' he said, as though in a slight daze. 'Oh, um, okay.' He blushed, and stood up. 'Sorry.'

'Don't apologize,' said Hermione quickly. 'It's okay. We just need to talk, is all.'

'Right,' said Neville, looking thoroughly miserable. Ron felt guilty. He didn't like leaving Neville out of things. Neville was a nice kid, and he'd come a long way in the six years they'd known him. But they'd made a pact not to involve anyone else outside of the four of them and Susan. This was for Neville's own good, really.

Neville trod slowly to the stairs and put a foot on the bottom step, then turned to them.

'Fancy Luna with that Defensive Charge,' he said, sounding impressed. 'I wonder if that's the book's influence.'

His words hung in the air, but they didn't penetrate until he was halfway up the staircase.

'Neville!' Hermione snapped. 'What did you say?'

'Oh,' said Neville and he went scarlet. 'Uh, about Luna, and...and wandless magic. I just wondered if the book had something to do with it.'

'What book?' said Harry slowly.

'You know,' said Neville. 'Uh, *The Book of Morgan Le Fey*.'

Ron was quite certain he could have heard a pin drop in that moment.

‘How...did you know about that?’ said Hermione slowly, and then she turned to Ginny.

‘I didn’t say a word, I swear,’ said Ginny adamantly.

‘Me, neither,’ said Harry and Ron together. It was a given, of course, that Hermione would never have breathed a word.

‘Nobody told me,’ said Neville, a bit defensively. ‘I figured it out.’

‘How?’ said Hermione.

‘Well, um,’ said Neville, blushing. ‘I remember when you asked about those genealogical charts, and I had forgotten to owl my gran about it, but you said you had everything you needed. But I sort of got curious about why you wanted a genealogical chart. I mean, we’re not doing any research on that stuff at the moment in History. But one day I was in the library studying History and I came across that bit in the textbook about the book, and I remembered Luna telling me how her mum had died; Luna mentioned her mum had been using a spell book, but that nobody else had a copy of it. I had asked her at the time what book it was, but she wouldn’t say. Only that her mum had passed it down to her. I guess I sort of put everything together on my own.’

‘Neville, do you know anything else?’ said Hermione urgently.

‘Anything else about...what?’ said Neville hesitantly. ‘I only know that Luna has this book. I don’t know why it’s such a big deal. I mean, I guess it’s a big deal for historic value. And when I saw what Luna did tonight I wondered if it had stuff in their on how to do really strong wandless magic. But...but that’s all I know.’

Ron glanced at Hermione, then at Harry and Ginny.

‘Neville, listen,’ said Hermione. ‘Have you told anyone else about this? About what you know?’

‘N-no,’ said Neville, looking nervous and a bit stricken. ‘Was I supposed to?’

‘No, you weren’t, Neville,’ said Ginny firmly. ‘It’s okay. You didn’t do anything wrong.’

‘That’s right, Neville,’ said Harry encouragingly. ‘But...look. You can’t tell anyone what you know, okay? It’s really important to keep the book a secret.’

‘Why?’ said Neville, his face screwing up in confusion.

‘We...can’t say,’ said Hermione apologetically. ‘We’re sorry.’

‘Oh,’ said Neville, and his face looked crestfallen.

‘We really can’t, Neville,’ said Ron lamely.

‘Why not?’ said Neville, and his face became as angry as Ron had ever seen it. ‘This...this is about...about You-Know-Who, isn’t it?’

‘Neville--’ said Hermione quickly, but Neville cut her off.

‘He wants that book, doesn’t he?’ said Neville. ‘That’s why Luna’s been so spooked lately. She and I have been talking, you know. She wouldn’t tell me what was bothering her, she just kept saying she’s scared. It’s because she knows he’s after the book.’

‘Harry,’ said Hermione helplessly, but Harry shrugged.

‘That’s it, isn’t it?’ said Neville, more confidently. ‘Voldemort wants the book so he can do wandless magic!’

Another silence greeted Neville’s words, and Harry swallowed.

‘You said it,’ he said. ‘You said Voldemort’s name.’

Neville blanched, then flushed. ‘Oh. Um...I did?’

‘Yeah,’ said Harry, and he couldn’t keep an impressed look off his face.

‘I guess...I did,’ said Neville, looking at his feet. ‘But...I’m right, aren’t I? About Vol-Voldemort wanting the book?’

The four of them looked at one another helplessly, and finally, Harry said, ‘We might as well tell him.’

‘Am I right?’ said Neville, suddenly eager. ‘Voldemort wants the book for wandless magic?’

‘You’re right about him wanting the book,’ said Hermione, casting her eyes round the room to check for any other students who might have slipped in unnoticed. ‘But not about the wandless magic part.’

‘Oh,’ said Neville, and he looked disappointed that he was only half right. ‘Well, what’s he want it for, then?’

At this, nobody said anything right away. Ron looked at Harry, then Ginny, then Hermione, and soon, Ginny and Harry were looking at Hermione.

‘What?’ she said.

‘You explain it to him,’ said Harry.

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Half an hour later, Neville headed up to the dormitory to, in his words, ‘recover from information overload.’ Hermione had told him everything, in the best layman’s terms she could manage, and Neville had listened raptly, never interrupting her once to ask any questions. Hermione finished with extracting a promise from Neville not to breathe a word of what she’d told him to anyone, on pain of a jinx that ‘made what Marietta Edgecombe got last year look mild.’ Neville gulped and readily agreed, remarking ruefully that he’d probably forget it all by tomorrow, anyway.

‘Shit,’ said Harry, running a hand through his hair. ‘Now Neville knows. Why don’t we just run a press release in *The Daily Prophet* and have done with it?’

‘He won’t tell anyone,’ said Ginny confidently. ‘He knows what Hermione would do to him.’

‘That’s not the point, Gin,’ said Harry tiredly.

Ginny paused, then said, ‘I know.’

‘Ginny,’ said Ron, ‘did you know anything about Luna’s ability to do wandless magic?’

‘No,’ said Ginny. ‘I mean, I knew she was working on it, but I never dreamed she’d be so powerful. She threw Carmichael off her like he was nothing.’

‘He didn’t look too happy about that, did he?’ said Harry.

‘Oh, you noticed that, too?’ said Ron. ‘Anything new to report, Gin, about Luna’s crush on our lovely Head Boy?’

‘She keeps insisting I’m the only one she’s told about the book,’ said Ginny. ‘But Eddie’s smart. If Neville figured it out, so could Eddie. I mean, I don’t THINK Eddie’s really evil, but I don’t like the idea of him knowing about the book, either. Anyway, she says that they’re just friends and that he’s been helping her with stuff, but she won’t say what the stuff is.’

‘So we’re no closer to knowing if Eddie knows,’ said Ron in frustration. ‘Bloody hell. And on top of this Dumbledore and Madam Bones and Percy and Hermione’s parents are all in hospital and we don’t know when they’ll be out--’

‘Hey.’

A fifth voice startled them all and they looked up. Bill had just crawled through the portrait hole. His hair was slightly mussed, his face was pale, and his eyes were red-rimmed.

‘Bill!’ Ginny yelped, and she ran to him and threw her arms round her oldest brother. He hugged her back and sighed. Ron, Harry and Hermione all crossed to him.

‘How’s Percy?’ said Ron at once.

‘He’s...he’s going to make it,’ said Bill, sounding tired. ‘But...his legs were really messed up in the attack. They’re...they’re not sure if he’ll walk again.’

Ginny put a hand to her mouth and her eyes filled with tears.

Ron, for his part, felt Hermione take his hand and Harry put a hand on his shoulder as he tried to process the idea that Percy would never have the use of his legs.

‘And...M-mum and Dad?’ said Ron weakly.

‘They’re still at the hospital,’ said Bill, clutching Ginny’s hand. ‘Percy woke up this afternoon and he recognized us, so that’s good news. He got your letter, Ron, right before I left. Pig must have flown like the wind to get it there. I had to carry the poor bugger back with me.’

‘Did Percy read the letter?’ said Ron, feeling a bit embarrassed but wanting to know all the same.

‘Yeah, he read it,’ said Bill. ‘He was...he was really happy about it. Can you imagine? Damn sod is sitting there with all the bones in his legs crushed and...and he smiled and said he was glad his little brother forgave him.’

Bill’s eyes became shiny, and Ron swallowed and felt a lump in his throat. Damn Percy. It had been so much easier to be angry with him.

‘What was he thinking?’ said Ron in a choked voice. ‘Taking on all those Death Eaters and Dementors like that, almost getting himself killed.’

‘Yeah,’ said Bill. ‘Who’d have thought?’ He cleared his throat and took a deep breath. ‘He told me he’ll write you two in the next couple of days, soon as he can sit up properly. I’m...I’m beat. I’m going to turn in.’

‘Thanks, Bill,’ said Ron. ‘For going and...for everything.’

‘You bet,’ said Bill. ‘What are big brothers for, right?’

‘Thank you, Bill,’ Ginny sniffed, and she hugged Bill tightly again.

‘Anything for my favourite sister,’ said Bill, smiling. He started toward the portrait hole, then turned, as if remembering something.

‘Good meeting tonight?’ he said, looking at Harry.

‘Oh,’ said Harry, blinking. ‘Uh, yeah. It was fine. We practiced the Defensive Charge.’

Hermione made a soft noise in her throat, and Ron, Harry, Ginny and Bill looked at her. Ron wondered if she was going to bring up the incident with Luna and Eddie, but she pursed her lips and said nothing, and the rest of them took her lead.

‘What?’ said Bill suspiciously.

‘Nothing,’ said Harry at once. ‘Just...well, Malfoy was being a prat but that’s nothing new. Tonks got in his face and straightened him out.’

‘Okay,’ said Bill. ‘I’m glad it went well. I’ll see you lot tomorrow, then. Good night.’

Murmurs of ‘good night, Bill,’ echoed in the common room, and then Bill was gone.

Everyone looked at Hermione.

‘Why didn’t we tell Bill about Luna?’ Harry asked, as if Hermione was the only logical person to ask such a question.

‘You saw him, Harry,’ said Hermione. ‘He’s knackered. It can wait until tomorrow.’

Everyone nodded at this, and though it was relatively early in the evening, Ron was so fatigued at this point that the only thing he could imagine doing now was going to bed. Ginny headed up the girls’ staircase, and Harry took the boys’, leaving Ron and Hermione alone.

‘Ron, are you okay?’ said Hermione gently, still holding his hand. ‘About Percy, I mean?’

‘I guess,’ Ron mumbled. ‘He’s alive, right? That’s what counts.’

‘That’s right,’ said Hermione, in a more firm voice.

Ron grunted and ran a hand through his hair, then pulled away from her and walked to the fireplace. All the guilt he’d been feeling today came roaring back at him.

‘He might not walk again,’ said Ron, and the lump in his throat threatened to overwhelm him, but words poured out of him anyway. ‘Stupid bloody git. He acts like he doesn’t even have a family for a year and a half and then he comes back and apologizes and what do I do? I throw it back in his face. I mean, yeah, he was a right sod about everything but...but he’s still my brother. Mum was so damn *happy* that he came back but the rest of us just treated him like dirt. I treated him like dirt. Because...because that’s how he treated me, and Dad and Mum and everyone else in our family and I just wanted him to know what it felt like. I could have been...I could

have been a bigger person and just forgiven him like Mum and Dad, but no, I had to hold a stupid grudge on him and it's only after the stupid git nearly gets himself killed that I find it in my heart to forgive him.'

'Ron, don't,' said Hermione at once, putting a hand on his shoulder. But Ron went on as though he hadn't heard her.

'And this morning, that was a good one, wasn't it?' he said. 'We're in a clinch and...and I'm not thinking one bit about my brother lying in hospital with his bones all crushed because he'd saved our dad's life. All I can think about is...is getting your top off.'

'Ron, stop this, please,' said Hermione, and he heard the tears in her voice.

'What kind of person does that make me, 'Mione?' said Ron miserably.

'Ron, stop it!' said Hermione, and she threw her arms round his waist and clung to him. 'You're not a bad person. You're...you're the best person I know. You're not supposed to be perfect. Nobody is. And...and what happened this morning...I mean, I was there, too, okay? My parents got attacked and I wasn't thinking about them this morning, either. Does that make me a bad person?'

He sighed and put his arms round her, and felt some of the constricting guilt in his chest ease. He couldn't believe how the simple act of holding on to her made everything feel a bit easier.

'No,' he said, in answer to her question. 'It doesn't make you a bad person.'

'Okay,' she said. 'So you're not a bad person either. Things are so...mad right now. We're just...trying to get through it, aren't we? However we can?'

She hugged him tighter and he rested his cheek on the top of her head, and they held each other for a long time. Ron was exhausted, but he didn't want to go to bed.

At least, not alone.

"Mione," he said softly. "Do you think...that is...would you mind...staying with me again, tonight?"

He felt her stiffen in his arms, and he wanted to kick himself. Why would she want to stay with him, when she would surely be discovered again the next morning by the ever nosy Seamus? She wouldn't want that embarrassment.

She looked up at him, and for a moment he couldn't read her expression, but then she smiled softly.

'Yes,' she said. 'I will.'

Ron felt warmth seeping into his bones. 'Good,' he said. 'We don't have to do anything, okay? I just...I like having you there.'

'Shh,' she said, putting a finger to his lips. 'I like being there. I'll just go upstairs and change. See you in a few minutes?'

'Okay,' said Ron, and she kissed him on the cheek and hurried up to her dormitory. A few minutes later she returned, wearing her pyjamas, but no robe.

'Um, I left my robe in your room,' she said, blushing a little.

'Oh, right,' he said. 'Well, you can pick it up tomorrow.'

A few minutes later they crept into the dormitory room to find it dark. The curtains of the other four posters were drawn shut.

Ron bit his lip when he saw that he hadn't bothered to make his bed today, but Hermione didn't seem to care; she pulled back the covers and climbed in. He went to brush his teeth, and when he returned, she was sitting up in bed, waiting for him. He grinned and practically jumped under the covers.

They came together so easily and naturally that were Ron not exhausted, it would have taken his breath away. Her head fit perfectly in the crook of his shoulder. His arms encircled her small body and his hands found her hair. Her leg drifted lightly over his. He felt sleep coming on him as she settled snugly against him.

He wondered how he'd ever managed to sleep before. Sleeping alone now seemed cold and empty. Sleeping next to Hermione seemed to take all the pain and bad feelings and coldness away. It didn't even matter that they didn't snog tonight. Just having her there was enough.

'I could get used to this,' he heard himself say, as he closed his eyes.

'Me, too,' said Hermione, letting her hand rest over his heart. They were both asleep in a matter of seconds.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Dreams and Nightmares

The sun beat down on his skin like fire and it was so bright out he could hardly see for squinting. It was so hot. Hermione shielded her eyes with one hand and tugged on his with the other, and slowly, his eyes came into focus.

They were walking. Or rather, she was walking, and he was following. They were at the lake just over the crest of the hill, near The Burrow.

This is odd, thought Ron. I was sure we were just at school.

‘Come on, Ron,’ said Hermione, in a soft voice. He looked down at her and she was smiling and she looked so beautiful. He smiled back and blinked and when he opened his eyes, she was no longer holding his hand, but standing on the little wooden dock that hung over the lake. The light breeze ruffled her wild hair but did nothing to cool him; his whole body was suffused with heat; it was almost suffocating him. A dip in the lake would feel like heaven.

He started toward her and heard her giggle.

‘Wait,’ she said. ‘Just stay there.’

He obeyed. He wasn’t sure just why but something in her voice persuaded him. He was about to ask her what she was doing, but in the next instant it became obvious, and he felt his mouth drop open as she peeled off her t-shirt, kicked off her shoes, unbuttoned her shorts and slid them down. She was wearing white cotton knickers and a matching bra; entirely practical and outrageously sexy. Ron gulped. Hermione laughed, winked at him, and then with a run and a squeal she launched herself off the end of the dock and into the water.

He was frozen in place; he’d never seen her in her underwear. He tried to rationalize that it was basically the same as a bikini, but that didn’t work. Then she surfaced and the water came up to her waist and dripped down her front and seemed to pool

between her breasts. The sun glistened off the water, off her skin, and made his vision swim.

‘Are you coming in?’ she called.

Ron’s feet seemed to react before his mind did. He raced to the end of the platform, yanked off his shoes and shirt, tearing it in the process. It was his favorite Chudley Cannons shirt but at that moment he didn’t care if the bloody thing disintegrated. He hurtled off the dock and landed in the water with an enormous splash.

His hands found her at once and he pulled her close and they kissed and the water cooled them even as Ron was engulfed in searing heat that threatened to make his very blood boil. Her wet skin against his was the very best kind of torture. She was wrapped around him, arms and legs and delicious heat, and he knew he couldn’t stand it anymore.

‘Mione, please,’ he begged, already fumbling with the clasp of her soaked bra.

‘Yes, Ron,’ she whispered. ‘Yes...’

He pulled the bra away and she was so beautiful and he couldn’t believe he was finally seeing her. And then she kissed him again, and the world went white and began to spin. And his lips moved to her neck and lower, lower, and she was taking his breath away with the feel of her skin under his hands, which stroked and caressed her softness, and he was drowning...

‘Ron,’ she said, and her voice sounded far away all of a sudden. ‘Ron...’

Ron blinked again. He was in his bed. At school. Nowhere near the Burrow. He was on his back, his hands in fists, the covers at his feet. He was roasting. He looked round and down and saw Hermione lying next to him. She was staring at him with wide eyes.

‘Ron?’ she whispered, and her bleary eyes sharpened with concern. ‘Are you okay?’

Ron swallowed and felt his face get hot. ‘Fine,’ he said. ‘Fine. Uh, why?’ Why, why, WHY did you wake me up? he wanted to say. It was just getting really, REALLY good.

‘You were just...well, moaning,’ she said.

‘Oh,’ said Ron. Bloody hell. He searched the recesses of his mind for a convincing reason--other than being randy--that would explain his moaning. He could say that he’d just had a bad dream, but if he said that, she’d get worried and upset. On the other hand, if he told her he’d been having a sex dream, with her in it, she’d get offended. It was difficult to know which lie to choose.

‘Uh, well, my...stomach’s a bit upset,’ he said lamely. ‘You know me. Always eating too many sweets.’

‘Your stomach,’ she said, and her voice changed. ‘Really?’

‘Really,’ he said, nodding.

‘Right,’ said Hermione, and she rolled her eyes. ‘You’re sure it’s your stomach and not something else?’

‘Positive,’ said Ron. Drop it, please, he thought desperately.

‘Ron, I’m not stupid, you know,’ said Hermione indignantly, and she sat up in bed and folded her arms across her chest.

‘I never said you were,’ said Ron quickly, sitting up, although for him this was distinctly more uncomfortable.

‘You really expect me to believe that...that THAT is a result of a stomachache?’ she hissed, pointing her index finger at him. His eyes followed to where her finger was pointing.

‘Oh, shit,’ he said, and he yanked up the covers. Why did stuff like this have to be so damn obvious? There were times--rare, to be sure, but there all the same--that he really hated being male.

‘Don’t swear,’ she said, and her face was bright red.

‘You’re the one pointing out...pointing out...things,’ Ron hissed at her. Great. All he needed now was for the other boys in the dorm to wake up and yank back his curtains and see him with a raging hormone indicator and her looking really, really hacked off.

‘I only did it because you were lying!’ she retorted. ‘And anyway it was so...obvious.’

Ron groaned and put his face in his hands. He felt stupid. He felt like a perv.

‘I’m sorry,’ he heard himself say in a pained voice. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...I can’t help...you think I’m a perv, don’t you?’

She said nothing, and he lowered his hands and shifted again. At least some of the pinching was going away.

She looked down at her own hands. ‘I don’t think...you’re a pervert,’ she said.

‘I didn’t mean to...’ he said. ‘I just...I’m sorry. Honest. It was just a dream.’

‘Must have been a good dream,’ she said, not looking at him.

‘It was,’ he admitted.

They said nothing for a long moment; they just sat next to one another on the bed. Ron wanted to take her hand, touch her hair, anything to break through this awkwardness, through his own embarrassment. It wasn’t as if he’d never woken up in an...alert state before. He had, plenty of times. But it was a whole other Quidditch game when your girlfriend was present.

‘What happened in the dream?’ said Hermione, still looking down at her hands, which she had begun to worry.

Ron stared at her. Was she really asking him for details?

‘Uh,’ he said dumbly. ‘Well, not much.’

‘Tell me,’ she said.

She wasn’t going to let this go. Ron took a deep breath and steeled himself.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘You and me were walking over to the lake, you know, by The Burrow--’

‘I was in the dream?’ she said, looking up.

‘Of course you were in it,’ he said, incredulously. ‘Who else would I dream about in that way?’

‘I dunno,’ she said. ‘Keep going.’

‘So we were walking to the lake and...and it was really hot outside and you went to the dock and, uh, suggested we take a swim. And so we did, and we kissed a bit. And...and that was it,’ he said.

She gave him her best I Don’t Buy It look. ‘That’s ALL that happened?’

‘Well,’ he said, swallowing, ‘you might have, uh, stripped down to your knickers.’

She blushed. ‘Oh,’ she said. ‘Okay. Um, what else?’

‘Well, you...we...you let me take your bra off,’ said Ron, looking at anything and anywhere but her. ‘And...shit, Hermione.’

‘What?’ she prodded. ‘And stop cursing.’

‘And I said, uh, “please, ‘Mione” and you kept saying, uh, “yes, Ron”, and I was sort of kissing you, uh, well, a bit lower than usual and uh, my hands were doing, you know, what I did the other night...I guess it might have gone on but...but I woke up,’ he mumbled, and at that moment he wished his bed would swallow him up.

‘Oh,’ she said again, nodding, and they were both as red as his bed curtains.

‘So,’ said Ron, ‘I’m...I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to have a...a dream like that about you, but...sometimes, well...I can’t help it. Okay? I’m sorry. I know you think I’m a dirty great perv--’

'I don't,' she said, and finally she looked at him. 'I don't. I just...I didn't know you thought about it...that much.'

'I don't,' he lied. She gave him another look.

'Okay, I do,' he said. 'But...I swear that's not the only thing I think about. Honest. I meant what I said before. About...not wanting to do stuff before you're ready. And that's not the only reason I'm with you. You know that, don't you? I'm mad about you. You know that.'

'I know,' she said, and she looked down. She looked terribly sad all of a sudden, and he moved closer to her.

'Mione, what's wrong?' he asked, and now he did take her hand.

'I'm scared,' she said, in a small voice.

'What, of Voldemort?' he said, and he gripped her hand tightly. 'Me, too. You'd have to be a nutter not to be scared of him--'

'No,' she said. 'Of...of that. Of...sex.'

'Oh,' he said. 'Well, you, uh, mentioned that. Before.'

'It's stupid,' she said. 'I shouldn't be scared of it.'

He didn't say anything for a moment, in part because he rather agreed with her. There were so many truly scary things out there. Sex hardly seemed like one of them. But instead he asked, 'Why are you scared? Because...because it might hurt?'

‘That,’ she conceded with a shrug. ‘And...and...’ She took a deep breath and Ron saw her eyes fill with tears.

‘What?’ he prodded gently.

‘That I won’t be any good at it,’ she said, wiping a tear away. ‘That you won’t...you won’t think I’m pretty enough--’

‘Hang on,’ he interrupted. ‘Are you barking? You think I won’t think you’re pretty enough? That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard, Hermione, and you’re not stupid. In case you haven’t figured it out by now I think...I think you’re amazing. And gorgeous. And wonderful. And lovely. And brilliant. And... and...do I have to go on and keep sounding like a prat here?’

She laughed and wiped her eyes again.

‘Hermione,’ he said, his voice low and serious. ‘Dreams are just dreams, okay? You’re my girl and...and you drive me insane and I don’t want anyone else and...believe me, I’m dying to see you naked, though I mean that in the most respectful way possible, and if...if I’m a randy dog half the time it’s because of the way you make me feel and not just because I’m a randy dog.’ He paused. ‘Okay, that made no sense.’

She giggled. ‘It made sense,’ she said. ‘Do I really drive you insane?’

‘Definitely,’ he said, chucking her lightly on the chin. ‘But...in a really good way.’

‘You drive me insane, too,’ she said, smiling shyly.

‘I’ll bet,’ said Ron, shaking his head. ‘Bone-headed, lazy, stubborn, temperamental...’

‘Sweet and thoughtful and lovely,’ Hermione corrected.

‘Sweet and thoughtful and lovely?’ he repeated. ‘Not, uh, manly and brave and heroic and...handsome?’

‘That, too,’ she said, and she put her arms round his neck and kissed him lightly, then harder. And they kissed slowly and deeply for several minutes and Ron was entirely excited again. But this wouldn’t do. It was getting near dawn now and the other boys would wake up and knowing Seamus, he would yank back the curtains again and this time the other boys would find Hermione snogging Ron while Ron sported that hormone indicator...

‘Mione,’ Ron murmured, ‘maybe we should get you back to your room.’

‘Anxious to get rid of me?’ she whispered, between kisses.

‘No way,’ he said, ‘but...Seamus...and the rest...’

‘Hang on,’ she said, and she reached beneath the pillow and extracted her wand.

‘You put that under the pillow?’ said Ron.

‘Of course,’ she said. ‘You really should, too. As a precaution. But...where was I? Oh, right...’

She muttered something and gave her wand a wave, and a brief glow appeared on the bed curtains.

‘What was that?’ said Ron.

‘Impervious Charm,’ she said. ‘Nobody can get in. And a Silencing Charm, too.’ She smiled, and it contained a mixture of triumph and bashfulness.

‘You’re brilliant,’ he said, and he pulled her close and kissed her and lowered her down onto the bed. His lips made a trail to her neck.

‘Ron,’ she whispered. ‘Maybe...maybe we could try a bit of what was in your dream.’

Ron’s head snapped up and he looked down at her. He could hardly believe he was hearing her correctly.

‘Are you serious?’ he said eagerly. She didn’t give a verbal answer; she just nodded.

He forced himself to go slow. When he slid the top from her shoulders, she quickly crossed her arms over her chest.

‘Hermione,’ Ron whispered, taking her wrists gently in his hands, ‘please let me.’

She bit her lip and nodded again, and he lowered her arms to her sides, and took a good, long look at her, hardly able to believe this was happening.

‘You’re beautiful,’ he heard himself say, and she smiled and blushed and said, ‘So are you.’ And he kissed her mouth, and his hands traveled over her naked skin, followed by his lips, and his senses were full of her, the taste and feel and scent of her bare skin, the sounds she made as she whispered his name, the way her eyes closed and her lips parted when he touched her, and he forgot about everything else.

Just over an hour later, she brought things to a halt. Ron bit back a groan and tried to ignore the continued throbbing down below--he'd probably have to do something about that later--and watched her pull her top back on and felt his hands still tingling from where they touched her, as they had the other night in the Quidditch tent, only this time was better.

Hermione smiled shyly at him before she got up.

'I think I am a scarlet woman,' she said, shaking her head, but she was smiling.

'No, you're not,' said Ron at once.

'Ron, that's the second time I've let you...well, you know,' she said, blushing and looking down.

'You say that like it's a bad thing,' said Ron.

'It's not,' she said. 'I just...well, it's a little embarrassing, that's all.'

'What's embarrassing?' said Ron, now thoroughly confused.

Hermione flushed even darker and her voice became distinctly frustrated. 'You know! When you...do that and I act all...well...'

'D'you...like it, though?' said Ron, sitting up.

Hermione gave a kind of tiny, almost inaudible squeak, and nodded. She was staring resolutely at her hands.

‘Then what’s the problem?’ said Ron.

‘I just feel a little weird afterward,’ she said. ‘While it’s happening it’s nice...better than nice...but afterward I start to think about, well, how I reacted during the whole thing and I think I must have made a kind of fool of myself or made weird faces or do something really bizarre, or maybe I’m not supposed to get all caught up in it because it feels like I lose my mind when I...when you, well, you know.’

Ron stared at her. ‘You think too much,’ he said.

‘Ron--‘

‘No, listen,’ said Ron insistently. ‘You don’t make stupid faces or do anything weird. If you ask me, you look bloody...I mean...you look really amazing and...and hot and sexy when, well, you know.’

Hermione gave another tiny squeak and covered her face with her hands, then looked at him. ‘I do?’

‘Yeah,’ said Ron fervently.

‘So...I’m not...you don’t think I’m a scarlet woman, then?’

‘No,’ said Ron.

‘Are you sure?’

Ron decided to tease her a bit.

‘Okay, you are, but you’re *my* scarlet woman,’ he said, with a slight growl in his voice. She swatted him on the head, hard, with his pillow.

‘Ow!’ he said.

‘You’re impossible,’ she said, giggling. He pulled her close and wrapped his arms around her.

‘You like me this way,’ he said, still grinning. ‘Admit it.’

‘I admit it,’ she said, rolling her eyes affectionately at him and kissing him lightly on the lips. ‘I must be mental.’

They kissed for a few minutes, but before Ron could explore the possibility of keeping her there long enough to do other things (again), she broke away and told him they absolutely HAD to get up and get ready for lessons. He agreed (very reluctantly) and she left, giving him one of those smiles that melted his insides and drove him crazy. It was a smile that was just for him.

Ron lay back on his bed, staring at the ceiling, a very foolish and very happy grin on his face. He thought about his dream, and about what had happened, and decided that the reality was indeed a million times better.

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‘Good morning!’ Ron said brightly, as he took a seat next to Harry.

‘Hello to you,’ said Harry, arching his eyebrows. ‘You’re in a good mood.’

‘Yeah, well,’ said Ron, ‘it’s spring and we have a match on Saturday and we’re going to wipe the grounds with slimy Slytherin arse.’

‘Uh huh,’ said Harry, and he lowered his voice. ‘Hermione spent the night again, I take it?’

‘Why yes, she did,’ said Ron, and he grinned again.

‘Never mind,’ said Harry, rolling his eyes. ‘I don’t think I want to know.’

‘Oh, look, there’s Hermione,’ said Ron, and he grinned across the hall at her. She smiled back and continued her conversation with Katie Bell.

Ron was still grinning as he poured himself some orange juice. ‘Isn’t she the best?’

‘Who, Hermione?’ said Harry, between bites of cereal.

‘No, the Fat Lady,’ said Ron. ‘Of course, Hermione.’

‘Ron, if you don’t stop this I’m going to gag on my breakfast,’ said Harry. ‘What’s with you, anyway? You two have been dating for months and you’re acting like you just got together. And I know you didn’t shag because you’d be acting a thousand times stupider. Which is saying something.’

‘I’m just...content,’ said Ron, pouring himself some cereal. He waved at Hermione, she waved back, and he winked at her.

‘Oh, my god,’ said Harry. ‘That’s it. Now I KNOW I liked the two of you better when you weren’t snogging all the time. Can’t you idiots have a nice big row like in the old days?’

‘Times change, mate,’ said Ron. ‘Anyway, you should talk. You haven’t spent a night in the dormitory in weeks.’

They spent another minute ribbing one another before they were joined by Neville, Ginny, Susan (who had migrated over from the Hufflepuff table) and the Creevey brothers.

They couldn’t discuss the latest about Luna or the book or anything else with the Creeveys there, but it was okay. Ginny didn’t look particularly anxious about anything, so he figured she must not have learned anything new from Luna. Ron was in such a good mood that he didn’t even really notice--well, not that much--the glares from the Slytherin table, or from Eddie Carmichael, who had taken a seat next to Luna at the Ravenclaw table.

Screeches and a soft whoosh from overhead announced the arrival of the morning post. Owls flew in and dropped parcels, and one landed on Ron’s head. Pig hooted tiredly and landed clumsily on the table, right on the plate of bacon.

‘Stupid git,’ Ron groaned. ‘Get away. I wanted some of that.’ Pig hooted happily and hopped off the bacon.

‘This had better be good, Pig,’ said Ron, turning the letter over in his hand. His breath caught when he saw the return post. The handwriting was a bit shaky, but Ron would have recognized the otherwise neat, precise script anywhere.

Then he heard Hermione give a soft, happy sort of sound.

‘I got a letter from my dad,’ she said, and her eyes were shining with happy tears. ‘And...Ron, that’s from Percy!’

‘I got one, too,’ said Ginny, smiling. ‘That...that must mean he’s awake and doing better.’

‘A letter from St. Mungo’s,’ said Susan, and she smiled weakly. ‘Auntie’s awake but she’s still really worn out so...so she won’t get to write for a few days.’

‘That’s good news, though, isn’t it, Sue?’ said Harry, taking her hand.

‘It’s good news,’ said Susan, nodding.

Hermione had already torn her letter open and was reading it; from the looks of it, her father had written her a veritable novel; now Ron knew where Hermione got her letter writing habits from.

Ron, for his part, slowly opened the letter and read it. As expected, it was several times longer than the one he had sent.

*Dear Ron,*

*Thank you for your letter. I am doing all right. My legs hurt like hell and I'm having to take a dozen foul potions a day but I'm told I'll make an almost full recovery. One foot was damaged quite badly, however, so it looks like I'll have a bit of a limp from here on out. All things considered I can't complain.*

*Did you hear the news about Father? Mother is beside herself, of course. Father, however, says he has no plans to run for the office when the election comes up; he says he's just not a politician at heart, really. In any case Madam Bones has done a fine job, considering how rough things have been all year, and she's assured of a complete recovery and will most likely be back at work in a few weeks. Father plans to step aside when she does.*

*Mother also tells me that you and Hermione have been dating.*

Ron sighed. ‘Ginny,’ he muttered. ‘Nosy brat.’ He continued to read the letter.

*I think this is wonderful news. Hermione is certainly a lovely girl, and she has to be a very positive influence on you, considering what an excellent student she is. I must warn you, however, that it is rather difficult to find any sort of privacy in the castle. Penelope and I had a devil of a time but*

*she eventually happened upon this extraordinary room that the house elves refer to as the Come and Go Room. If you haven't heard of it, you can find it next to the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy; the trick is that it only appears if you really need it. Just walk past the tapestry a few times and think about the sort of room you need and it'll be there. A wonderful room, really, although you really shouldn't use it too often. You are still a prefect, after all. I would never encourage such rule-breaking normally, of course, but when it comes to girlfriends this is a special exception.*

Ron felt his face go hot and thought about the events of just an hour and a half ago. Hermione in his bed, noticeably lacking certain items of clothing...

‘Focus,’ he said out loud.

‘What?’ said Harry and Hermione together.

‘Nothing,’ said Ron quickly, looking down. Harry shook his head and Ron felt Hermione nudge him and smile. He smiled back and went back to reading the letter from Percy.

*I expect to be out of hospital within the next two weeks. Mother and Father have asked me to come stay with them at the Burrow for the summer. I'd very much like to but if you prefer that I didn't, I'll go back to my flat in London. I do not want to create any tension during the holiday, especially when it's to be your last summer as a Hogwarts student. You will have N.E.W.Ts to prepare for, after all. In any event, please send an owl to me directly with your reply, so that I can inform Mother and Father straight away.*

*I hope all is well at school. Please be sure to be careful; it's a dangerous time right now and Professor McGonagall will be looking to the prefects to set the example for the other students. Nonetheless I am quite confident that you are perfectly safe at Hogwarts, what with all the spells and enchantments (and now trolls and Aurors) protecting the school. If you wish to know more about this it's all found in Hogwarts, a History, a fascinating book I highly recommend if you haven't devoured it already.*

*Yours,*

*Percy*

Ron folded the letter and felt better than he had in weeks. He'd spent the morning fooling around in bed with the greatest, most amazing girl in the world, and his brother--his uptight prig of a brother--was...his brother again. And he was going to recover and even walk, if a bit poorly. Somehow, Voldemort and evil plots to poison Muggles seemed very far away that morning.

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Ron's good mood carried him through lessons, and he got rather good marks that day. On this high note, he walked back with a group of Gryffindors--accompanied by a young male Auror--to Gryffindor tower to compose a quick response to Percy's letter.

Dear Percy,

Glad to hear you're on the mend. It's fine with me for you to stay the summer. Check with Fred and George, though. And make sure Mum cleans out your room. I'm pretty sure they did some stuff to it.

Ron

He sent Pig on with the letter and made a mental note to award him with extra owl treats when the little bugger got back.

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The week continued without incident. Ron and the others were still checking *The Daily Prophet* every morning. Ginny was still keeping an eye on Luna. Neville was still keeping his mouth shut. Eddie had done nothing untoward; Malfoy was being his usual awful self, but that was nothing new. Bill was in a far better mood now that Percy was on the mend. Lessons went well. Hermione was spending every night in Ron's room, entering after the other boys fell asleep (Harry slept...somewhere else, with Susan) and leaving before they woke up. In between, Ron and Hermione slept and did other things that had nothing to do with sleep.

The only wrinkle, as far as Ron was concerned, was Hermione's insecurity. She was convinced she just wasn't that nice to look at. It was mad and he tried to tell her that

but she would just brush off his compliments. He tried not to let it bother him, but it did. He broached the matter with Bill after a Dark Arts lesson on Thursday.

‘So, you’re saying she’s insecure?’ said Bill.

‘Yeah,’ said Ron. ‘I mean, it’s mad. I’m crazy about her and I think she’s beautiful but it’s like she doesn’t believe me.’

Bill smiled and shook his head. ‘That’s girls for you. The most beautiful girl in the world never thinks she’s pretty enough. Fleur was the same way.’

‘Bullshit,’ said Ron, scoffing. ‘Fleur Delacour? As in part Veela, reducing men to stupid, incoherent blobs, too beautiful to be real Fleur? THAT Fleur?’

‘I know, it’s barking, isn’t it?’ said Bill. ‘But in my experience it doesn’t matter how gorgeous the woman is. They all get freaked out about being naked in front of a bloke.’

‘That’s ridiculous,’ said Ron. ‘I mean, we’re talking about Hermione. She doesn’t worry about all that girly, image stuff. And she doesn’t need to, anyway. I like how she looks just as she is.’

‘You think it’s ridiculous, and I think it’s ridiculous, but it’s not to them,’ said Bill. ‘Most girls care about how they look, and worry about it. Even if they don’t put make-up on or whatever. All you can do is be sensitive and show her how hot you are for her.’

‘Shut it,’ said Ron, blushing. ‘She knows that. I mean, I tell her.’

‘That’s good,’ said Bill. ‘You two haven’t--’

‘No,’ said Ron. ‘She’s, uh, a bit scared about it. Well, the naked thing and the whole pain thing.’

‘There is that,’ said Bill. ‘But it’s no better for us. Not really.’

‘It’s not?’ said Ron. ‘You’re joking.’

‘Nope,’ said Bill. ‘Don’t get me wrong. It’s amazing and you’ll have a great time, most likely, but first times are always awkward and clumsy, and you’ll be lucky if it lasts ten seconds.’

‘Ten seconds?’ said Ron. ‘That’s it?’

‘It takes time and practice to build...stamina,’ said Bill, grinning. ‘Young men like yourself aren’t exactly experts in the art of self-control.’

‘Piss off,’ said Ron. ‘You probably weren’t a genius at it, either, back then.’

‘Me?’ said Bill. ‘I was bloody horrible at it, and I only last five seconds the first time. A nightmare. Totally humiliating. But I got better at it with practice, just like everyone else.’

‘How much practice?’ said Ron. On the one hand, frequent sex sounded just fine to him. On the other hand, he wondered just how badly he would stink at it and how long it would take to get good at it. Please, Merlin, not as long as it took me to get decent at Keeping.

‘As much as you both want,’ said Bill. ‘The more you practice, the better it gets.’

Ron grinned. ‘Cool.’

‘Yeah,’ said Bill, winking. ‘And anyway, Weasleys have to be pretty good at sex, right? Look at Mum and Dad. Randy AND fertile.’

‘Oh YUCK!’ said Ron, appalled. ‘I don’t want to imagine...Mum and Dad...that’s disgusting. I’m going to have nightmares now!’

‘Hey, you and me didn’t just appear out of thin air, you know,’ said Bill, rolling his eyes. ‘But that does bring up a good point. When you and Hermione do get around to having sex, for Merlin’s sake, use birth control.’

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The final Quidditch match of the season took place on a glorious Saturday morning. Ron awoke early, feeling refreshed and well-rested for the first time in weeks. A kind of bright optimism and confidence filled him as he pulled on his jeans and t-shirt to go down to breakfast. They would be matched against Slytherin, and this would be the perfect opportunity not only to win the cup again, but to get revenge on Malfoy for setting in motion the fight last year that had lead to Harry, Fred and George's Quidditch ban. Ron also couldn't help but feel much lighter-hearted since reconciling with Percy. Things were better than Ron could have expected.

Ron met Ginny, Harry and Hermione in the common room, and headed out of the portrait hole, where they were greeted by Tonks.

‘Wotcher!’ she said, grinning. ‘Ready to kick some Slytherin arse?’

‘Definitely,’ said Harry, grinning back. ‘Always brings joy to my day, humiliating Malfoy.’ He didn’t seem to mind one bit having to be escorted by an adult to the Great Hall. A far cry from a year ago.

‘Wish I could stay and watch the match,’ she said regretfully, ‘but I’ve got to get back to London this morning and meet with Kingsley about some new recruits.’

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Chaos

‘Students get inside the castle NOW!’ came a loud, amplified voice. It was McGonagall.

The students needed little prompting. In the next instant there was chaos as students poured out of the stands and onto the pitch, screaming, running, tripping.

‘Ginny, Hermione!’ Ron yelled, even now feeling the horrible weight of cold descend over him. ‘Stay with me!’ Ron blinked, struggling to fight off the dread chill that was filling his very bones. Hermione and Ginny had pulled out their wands.

‘Move this way!’ Ron said loudly, pulling both girls out of the way of a stream of panicked students; they were in danger of all being trampled.

But before they could move again and join the thinning crowd, the Dementors began to move in earnest, and the icy cold despair came with them.

‘Think of something happy!’ Hermione screamed. Two Dementors floated with amazing speed toward them and she cried ‘*Expecto Patronum!*’ A silver otter burst from her wand and hurtled toward the Dementors, going right through them and causing them to turn.

But they didn't flee, because behind them were ten more of their fellows.

Happy thoughts, Ron thought desperately. Winning the Quidditch Cup...NO! Stupid prat, that's no good! Hermione. Think of Hermione...

‘*Expecto Patronum!*’ Ron and Ginny both yelled. Thin silver wisps burst from their wands.

Happy thoughts. Percy's okay. He's back with the family. Hermione. She loves you. Ginny. Best little sister in the world...

On impulse Ron grabbed Ginny's hand; her eyes met his and something passed between them. It was as if her strength flowed into him, and his into her. He'd never felt more like her brother than in that moment.

'EXPECTO PATRONUM!'

They both screamed the incantation at the top of their lungs, and a bear and a leopard appeared. Both opened their mouths to emit silent roars and charged the approaching Dementors. Hermione shouted the spell again, sending out another otter, and the combined spells caused the Dementors to back off.

'Run!' Ron yelled, his vision a bit clearer, the cold feeling in his blood receding. Ginny and Hermione took off toward the castle, Ron at their heels. He couldn't believe they'd pulled that one off; he'd practiced Patronuses but Harry had been right- it was entirely harder to do it with real Dementors around.

Already, the dozens of Aurors who'd been on guard were racing onto the grounds, wands in hand; they raced past Ron and the others without a second glance, their minds and eyes focused on battling the onslaught of Dementors and Dark powers.

'Where's Harry!' Hermione cried as they rushed toward the retreating, screaming crowd.

'Look out!' Ginny screamed. Two Death Eaters had appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, and aimed their wands at the group of them.

'Expelliarmus!' Ron and Hermione both shouted, disarming the Death Eaters and sending them tumbling backwards.

'What the bloody hell is going on?' Ron yelled, as they ran on, searching desperately for a sign of Harry. 'HARRY!'

Merlin, let Harry be okay. If the Death Eaters took him...

'His scar was hurting,' Hermione panted. 'I saw him when he was flying, holding his scar!'

'HARRY!' Ron bellowed.

'There!' Ginny shrieked, pointing toward the castle. Three Death Eaters were advancing on him; Harry was clutching his scar with one hand and aiming his wand

with his other. One of the Death Eaters fired a spell from his wand; Harry managed to block it with a Protection Spell, but it was weak, and Harry's knees buckled as he tumbled to the ground.

'HARRY!' the three of them yelled, hurtling toward him. Harry threw a Stunning Spell at the second Death Eater and knocked him down, but the other two both took aim with their wands.

Ron's heart clenched when he heard them both scream '*Crucio!*'

There was nothing Ron, Hermione or Ginny could do to stop the curses from hitting Harry; he gave an unearthly scream of pain and began to writhe on the ground. Fury rose in Ron like an explosion, and suddenly he was running faster than he'd ever run in his life.

'You BASTARDS!' he roared. '*Impedimenta!*'

Somewhere behind him he heard Hermione and Ginny both scream, but he didn't turn; his eyes took in the nearest Death Eater, who flew backward twenty feet with the force of Ron's Impediment Jinx; the Death Eater's compatriot jerked up and released Harry from the Cruciatus Curse in time to see a very tall, very strong red haired young man barrel into him.

A sharp pain shot through Ron's shoulder as he slammed his whole body into the Death Eater and took him down. They landed hard and rolled, and Ron felt his wand fly out of his hand.

Ron's attack gave him an initial advantage, but the Death Eater was stronger than Ron expected, and suddenly he found himself on his back, with the Death Eater over him. They wrestled and the Death Eater managed to get one huge hand around Ron's throat, while the other raised his wand and pointed it in his face.

'Ron!' He heard Hermione scream his name as the Death Eater on top of him squeezed his throat. Then he heard more screams and knew that Ginny and Hermione were battling Death Eaters of their own.

Ron gasped and grabbed the Death Eater's wand hand and held it away from him as his other hand pulled desperately at the hand at his throat. Ron's vision began to swim.

'STUPEFY!' The Death Eater jerked back as the spell hit him, then collapsed heavily on top of Ron in a limp heap.

Ron blinked and gasped and took a gulp of air. Someone had Stunned the Death Eater. He blinked again and shoved the limp form of the Death Eater off him and slowly stood up, trying to get his bearings. His eyes widened when he saw Harry.

'You okay?' he said, and he handed Ron his wand.

'Yeah,' said Ron, amazed. Harry'd been hit with two Cruciatus Curses, and but for his sweating and panting, he was okay.

'Thanks,' Ron said.

'You, too,' said Harry. 'Remind me never to piss you off; that was a nasty tackle. You should play rugby.'

'What's rugby--' Ron began, but then he heard another scream.

Ginny.

'The girls!' Ron cried, and he and Harry whirled round to see Ginny struggling in the grasp of a Death Eater.

Harry and Ron raced toward her. Ginny was putting up a fierce struggle and Ron saw that the Death Eater had taken her wand. She flailed and kicked and then twisted round and bit her captor on the wrist; his response was to growl and backhand her in the face, sending her tumbling. The Death Eater raised his wand and pointed it at her.

Ron's fury returned, only this time he kept the presence of mind to use his wand.

'Accido!' he bellowed, hitting the Death Eater with a Falling Jinx so powerful that the Death Eater's legs flew out from beneath him. He landed hard, in a heap, and Ron heard the sickening crunch of bone as the Death Eater shrieked in pain. But Ron barely noticed; he was focused on his sister even as his brain panicked. Where was Hermione?

'Incarcerous!' Harry yelled, and in the next instant the moaning, whimpering Death Eater was tied with invisible ropes, unable to hold onto the ankle he'd broken in his fall. Harry found Ginny's wand and picked it up.

'Ginny!' Ron yelled, and he hurried to her side and helped her up. A nasty bruise was forming on her cheek. 'Are you okay?'

'I'm fine,' she said impatiently, even as she winced and rubbed at her jaw. She took her wand from Harry.

'Where's Hermione?' Ron asked, whirling round in every direction.

'She and Susan and I got separated,' said Ginny. 'Death Eaters chased us...they sent Hermione and Susan toward the Forest--'

'Shit!' said Harry and Ron together, and the three of them took off in the direction of the Forest at a sprint.

They were nearly there when half a dozen Dementors zoomed in their path, the breaths rattling with anticipation and hunger. At once, cold despair seized Ron, and he saw Harry begin to sweat.

Good thoughts, good thoughts. Finding Hermione. Living happily ever after with Hermione and playing Quidditch with Harry and eating all the sweets he could...

‘EXPECTO PATRONUM!’

Three silver Patronuses--a stag, a bear and a leopard--burst from the ends of three wands, and charged the Dementors. Almost at once the heavy coldness lifted, and Ron, Ginny and Harry started off toward the Forest once more.

At that very moment, Susan and Hermione came bursting from the trees; they were both bleeding and looked terrified.

Seconds later Hermione barreled into Ron's waiting arms. Susan nearly knocked Harry over with the force of her embrace.

‘Ron!’ Hermione cried, and her voice was shrill with fear.

‘I’m here,’ he said. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Fine,’ said Hermione. ‘We’re both fine.’

‘Your forehead’s bleeding,’ said Ron anxiously.

‘It’s nothing--‘

And at that moment, new sounds filled the air. Whooshing sounds, and trampling sounds, and a great, unearthly roar as massive footsteps shook the earth.

‘Bloody hell,’ said Harry.

‘The Death Eaters...’ Susan panted. ‘In the Forest...centaurs...and...and a giant...’

‘A WHAT?’ said Ginny.

Another roar came from the Forest and then there were several loud cracks in the distance, along with more whooshing noises. Then more stomping, and Ron’s eyes went wide. In the distance, he saw it. A massive figure, so stocky and huge it looked like an enormous, twenty foot tall, moss-covered boulder.

The giant’s arms flailed and he stomped and roared and though Ron couldn’t make out the creature’s face from such a distance, through the thick cover of the trees, he knew at once that the giant was furious about something. Was he being attacked by Death Eaters? Or had he run afoul of the centaurs again?

‘So that’s...Grawp,’ Ron heard himself say, amazed.

‘RON!’

Ron and the others turned to see Bill sprinting toward them. He, too, was bleeding, from a cut on his cheek. His hair was loose and tangled; his robes were muddied. Behind him were five Aurors.

‘Bill, what--’

‘Are you lot out of your minds?’ Bill roared. ‘Get inside NOW! Go!’

Nobody was inclined to argue with Bill at this point; Ron couldn't remember seeing his oldest brother look so furious. At once, he, Harry, Susan, Hermione and Ginny raced away from the forest, in the direction of the castle.

They were halfway there when Harry gave a yelp and stumbled.

'Harry!' Hermione and Susan both yelled.

Harry rolled over on the ground, clutching his scar.

'Harry, come on, mate!' Ron said desperately, and he leaned down and lifted Harry off the ground.

'Ron...' Harry gasped, panting, as he collapsed against the taller boy, '...Luna...find her...'

For a moment nobody said a word; it was as if the realization had to penetrate the recesses of fear-fogged brains. But then a collective gasp went up from the group. It was Ginny who reacted.

'BILL!' she screamed. 'Bill!'

Bill, who'd been about to head into the forest to, Ron surmised, stop Grawp from trampling everything in sight, whirled around.

'Get inside!' he snapped.

'Luna!' Ginny and Hermione yelled.

‘You have to find her!’ Harry cried.

Bill’s eyes widened for a split second, and he nodded. Ron saw his oldest brother pull one of the Aurors aside and issue some sort of instructions; in the next instant Bill was racing back in the direction of the castle, toward them.

‘GO INSIDE!’ Bill stormed, and then his eyes moved elsewhere. ‘Professor McGonagall!’

Ron turned and saw Professor McGonagall rush over, her tartan hat flying off her head.

‘Get these students inside, Weasley!’ she bellowed.

‘We have to find Luna Lovegood,’ Bill said quickly, giving her a significant look.

McGonagall gasped and went white.

‘Dear god,’ she breathed. Then she composed herself, her eyes steely and determined. ‘Follow me, William. Ronald, Miss Granger, get these students inside NOW. Leave this to us!’

‘Professor, wait--’ Harry begged, making a motion to follow her. He stumbled and clutched at his scar again, then sank to his knees.

‘No arguments, Potter!’ shouted McGonagall, not even turning to look back at him.

‘Come on!’ Ron shouted, feeling the cold come over him again. Dementors were approaching. He grabbed Harry by the arm and dragged him toward the castle. Ginny, Susan and Hermione followed, wands out and alert.

In the next instant four Death Eaters burst onto them, wands raised.

‘*Impedimenta!*’ ‘*Stupefy!*’ ‘*Petrificus Totalus!*’ The shouts of the girls were indistinguishable but stopped three of the Death Eaters in their tracks. A fourth dodged a wand blast from Ron and aimed for Harry.

‘*Stupefy!*’ came a shout from behind them. Neville Longbottom was running toward them. ‘What’s going on?’ he squeaked fearfully.

‘We're under attack!’ Ron bellowed. ‘Or can't you tell?’

‘How did they get onto the grounds?’ Neville cried, dodging another Death Eater that was sent flying by the spell of a nearby Hufflepuff.

‘Don't know,’ Ron panted, half-carrying a limp Harry up the front steps. Harry seemed to have gone into a kind of half-faint. His face was pale and sweaty and he was moaning out loud in pain.

Hagrid was standing at the front doors, bellowing at the students to get inside.

‘Oi, Ron, Hermione, wha's happened?’ he boomed as they started through the threshold.

‘Harry's scar hurts,’ Ron gasped. ‘He...he must have had a vision during the game. We couldn't get to him before...’

‘That'll do,’ Hagrid said, understanding at once. ‘Get inside.’

‘Hagrid...Grawp's...out there!’ Ron panted. ‘In the...Forest...’

‘Shite,’ Hagrid groaned. ‘I'd better see to him...’

‘Hagrid, what are you doing with a wand?’ Hermione asked. Ron stared at her--they were under attack by Death Eaters and Dementors and she wanted to know why Hagrid had a wand?

‘Special circumstances, obviously!’ Hagrid yelled. ‘Get inside, all o' ye!’ Hagrid lumbered down the front stairs onto the grounds.

Professors Vector and Sinistra, wands out and raised high, raced past Ron and the others. Then came several Aurors. Ron nodded to Hermione and the others to start inside when there was an explosion so loud and violent that the ground shook. Ron stumbled and Harry slipped out of his grip, only to be caught clumsily by Neville.

In the next instant a massive tree sagged and began to topple. More screams came from students as they fled to get out of the way.

‘*Wingardium Leviosa!*’ came a voice. It was Bill--the spell hit the trunk of the tree and stopped its fall. Bill, sweating and his arm shaking, his hair out of its neat ponytail, managed to lower the tree slowly to the ground.

Another explosion, and a huge chunk of the front wall crumbled, sending a few students tumbling ten feet below. They landed and Ron heard a sickening crunch of bone breaking, followed by shouts of pain.

‘GET INSIDE!’ Professor Sinistra yelled, aiming her wand at three Dementors who were speeding toward the castle doors. ‘*Expecto Patronum!*’ she bellowed, and a massive falcon burst from her wand and smacked at the Dementors with its wings.

‘Ron!’ Bill raced up the stairs. ‘What are you doing? Get inside!’

‘Where’s Luna?’ Hermione cried. ‘Did you find her?’

‘Enough!’ Bill snapped. ‘Inside, all of you!’

‘What’s happened to Luna?’ Neville asked, hoisting a still-limp Harry up.

‘NOW!’ Bill shouted, shoving Hermione, Ron and Ginny through the door. He scooped up Harry in his arms and strode inside.

‘Stay here,’ he ordered. ‘Go to the common room. Let us sort this out, okay? We’ve got Aurors here, and the trolls are going to help out, too. You’re safe inside the castle. Now get moving!’

He didn’t wait for them to obey, but ran back outside, trailing red hair and black robes.

They watched him go, scared and breathless, then rushed off in the direction of the Gryffindor common room.

‘He needs to get away from all the Dementors,’ Hermione said briskly, her wand still out and her eyes glancing behind them. ‘We can lie him down on the sofa.’

Harry suddenly moaned and his eyes fluttered. They all stopped, and Neville and Ron held him up.

‘Harry!’ Susan shouted, slapping very gently at his face as it lolled against Neville’s shoulder. ‘Wake up, Harry. Please!’

‘Luna,’ Harry moaned. ‘They’ve got Luna. They’ve got her.’

‘No,’ Hermione and Ginny gasped together.

‘Carmichael,’ Harry mumbled.

‘What about Carmichael?’ Ron asked, feeling a rush of dread.

‘They took him, too.’

‘Carmichael?’ said Ron. ‘Why the bloody hell did they take him?’

‘Dunno,’ said Harry, rubbing his scar; then he winced and clutched his scar again, doubled over in pain.

‘Harry!’ Susan cried, and she clung to him and tried to hold him up; Ron came to her side and lifted Harry up to a standing position.

‘What is it?’ said Hermione, gripping Harry’s hand. ‘Did they...oh, no...they got the book, too, didn’t they?’

Harry said nothing; he looked as though he was incapable of speaking, so stretched in pain was his face. He simply nodded. Ron felt his stomach plummet.

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## *Chapter Twenty-Eight: Battle and Aftermath*

‘Dear god,’ Hermione whispered. ‘Harry, we have to get you upstairs.’

‘No,’ said Harry. ‘We should be outside, helping Bill--’

‘Are you mad?’ Ron asked. ‘Look at you, you can hardly stand up.’

‘We have to!’ Harry snapped.

‘We’ll go back down and help them as soon as you’re settled in the common room,’ Ron snapped.

‘What? No! You’re not leaving me--OW!’

Ron nodded to Neville, and they seized Harry by the arms and half-dragged him up the stairs, Harry screeching furiously all the way.

Ron and Neville forced Harry onto the sofa.

‘Dammit, I’m fine!’ Harry growled, trying to stand up and swaying as he did.

‘Merlin’s beard, Harry, would you SIT DOWN and SHUT UP!’ Ron barked, shoving Harry back onto the sofa. ‘You’re no good to anybody if you can’t even stand.’

‘Eat dung, Ron!’ Harry yelled, and he began to stand up again, but this time Susan intervened.

‘Harry!’ she snapped. ‘Ron’s right. You have to calm down! You’re not helping!’

‘Damn right, I’m not helping,’ said Harry bitterly. ‘You lot won’t LET me help and--ow...’ He clapped a hand over his scar and sat back woozily on the sofa. Susan sat next to him, and he collapsed against her.

‘It hurts,’ he moaned, and he bit his lip.

‘I know,’ said Susan, her eyes filling with tears as she held onto him. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘I’ll get him some water,’ Neville said nervously, and he started up the stairs to the boys’ bathrooms.

Harry moaned softly again, and Susan stroked his messy hair, and he seemed to calm down a bit.

Ron swallowed. He hadn’t meant to be rough with Harry, but the stupid git could be so stubborn sometimes.

He could hear more sounds coming from outside, more screams and crashes, and a part of him knew he should go back out and help; he might not be a fully qualified wizard but he was of age now, and he was pretty good at defensive stuff, and he could lend a hand. But he didn’t want to leave Harry until he was sure Harry was okay.

‘Feeling, uh, better, Harry?’ he asked uncertainly.

‘Didn’t see it,’ Harry mumbled. ‘Didn’t see it coming.’

‘You didn’t?’ said Ginny. ‘But...we saw you holding your scar.’

‘I knew something was wrong,’ said Harry, now sounding exhausted. ‘But I didn’t know...he was happy about something and I tried to see what it was but then...then it was too late. And then the Dementors came and I couldn’t think...I should have seen it coming...’

‘Stop it, Harry,’ said Hermione at once. ‘Stop thinking this is your fault. It happened so fast! One minute everything was normal and...and the next Dementors were everywhere.’

‘Hermione’s right, Harry,’ said Susan. ‘You...you know how you get when Dementors are close by. You’re good at fighting them off now but...but there were so many.’

‘We have to help them,’ said Harry, lifting his head from Susan’s shoulder. ‘We have to.’

‘We will,’ said Hermione. ‘But you should stay here.’

‘I’m not staying here!’ Harry snapped. ‘I have to be out there, too.’

‘Harry, come on, mate,’ said Ron. ‘Just...let us do this for once, okay? You don’t have to fight every single battle!’

‘Harry, please, listen to Ron,’ Susan begged.

‘You’re taking his side?’ said Harry incredulously.

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake, Harry, that has nothing to do with it!’ Hermione said sharply.  
‘Ron’s right. You’re no good to anyone in a fight, not like this.’

‘Oh, and I suppose you lot are experts at dueling with Death Eaters now?’ Harry retorted.

‘Nobody said that,’ said Ron, groaning. Merlin, but he hated when Harry got like this.

‘I’m telling you, if you lot are going back down there to fight I’m going with you,’ said Harry.

‘No, you’re not,’ said Ginny quietly. She was standing at the far window, looking out onto the grounds, and her voice was odd.

‘What?’ said Harry angrily, and he stood up, still a bit wobbly. ‘Look here, Ginny, you can’t tell me--’

‘None of us is going back down there,’ she interrupted. ‘It’s over. The battle’s over. The Death Eaters are gone.’

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‘Gone?’ Harry repeated. ‘What do you mean, gone?’ He, Ron and the others all headed to the windows near Ginny and stared out onto the grounds.

'Blimey,' Ron breathed, and he heard Hermione give a small whimper. Automatically, his arm went round her shoulder and drew her close.

The scene was ghastly. The grounds were littered with bodies. Some Death Eaters, some Aurors, and a few students.

'What's going on--oh, my god,' Neville gasped, as he took up the space next to Ginny, holding a water glass. 'Are they...dead?'

'Dunno,' Harry said dully. 'Probably. At least some.'

They watched as several remaining Aurors and teachers, and a few students, began to lift the limp forms of other students and Aurors and carry them toward the castle. They left the Death Eaters where they lay. Ron's eyes scanned the grounds for a sign of Bill. Please, Merlin, not Bill, he thought. But there was no sign of Bill that Ron could see. At least, no sign of bright red Weasley hair.

'We have to go down there,' said Ginny, her voice hollow. She turned to face Ron, and there were silent tears spilling down her cheeks. 'We have to help.'

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The scene that greeted them at the entrance of the castle was one that Ron knew he would never forget. Wounded Aurors, some who could hardly walk, were carrying the limp forms of their colleagues. Ron glanced to his left and saw Professor Vector helping a small second year girl toward the hospital wing. The girl--a Ravenclaw--was sobbing and Professor Vector was speaking to her softly. All round them were sounds of crying, moans of pain. And the smell. Blood, sweat, death. Ron swallowed bile in his throat and willed himself not to be sick, willed the fury building like acid in his stomach to keep from exploding.

'Where's Bill?' Ginny asked.

‘Dunno,’ said Ron. ‘But...but he’s got to be okay. I didn’t see anyone who...who looked like him. And he’s tough. He would have--’

‘He’s got to be okay,’ said Ginny, her eyes shiny and red. ‘He has to.’

‘Ron! Ginny!’

He and Ginny turned and saw Bill hurrying toward them. He was limping slightly, and bleeding from a gash in his shoulder. His face was bruised and lacerated. He looked horrible, and haunted.

‘Bill!’ Ginny cried, and she burst into tears and ran into his arms. Bill held her and stroked her tangled hair.

‘It’s okay, Gin,’ he murmured. ‘It’s over.’

Ron, Hermione, Harry, Susan and Neville hurried over to Bill as he gently extricated himself from Ginny’s embrace.

‘You all okay?’ he said, brushing his hair from his face.

‘Fine,’ said Ron dully.

‘We...we didn’t find Luna,’ said Bill slowly. ‘She might have gone into the Forest, or--’

‘They got Luna,’ said Harry. ‘And the book.’

Bill swore vociferously for a long moment and kicked the wall viciously with his dragon hide boot, marring the surface. He didn't seem to care.

'I'd better tell the Aurors,' he said. 'The ones who're left anyway. We have to get a message to the Ministry, to Dad. And I'd better gather the rest of the faculty.'

'Can't McGonagall do that?' said Ron.

Bill looked up and his eyes became red. 'McGonagall...was hit in the attack.'

A gasp went up from all of them. Hermione clapped a hand over her mouth.

'Is she...is she--' Harry tried, but he couldn't say it. Ron could hardly bear to think of it.

'She's alive,' said Bill. 'But barely. I don't know what they did to her but it's bad, and she's not young anymore, either. We're going to set up an emergency Portkey and transfer her to St. Mungo's. Sprout's volunteered to take her. In the meantime...I guess I've been put in charge.'

Nobody said anything for a moment. Ron wondered at the cruel irony that had certain members of his family assuming positions of authority because somebody else had gotten badly injured.

'What can we do, Bill?' said Hermione anxiously, casting a glance at everyone in their small circle. 'We want to help.'

'Get to the hospital wing,' said Bill at once. 'Pomfrey's swamped with wounded. Anything you can do.'

‘Bill, we have to figure out how to get the book back,’ said Harry desperately.

‘We’re working on it, Harry,’ said Bill, through gritted teeth. ‘Listen to me. There’s nothing you can do about that now, okay?’

‘But--‘

‘Voldemort isn’t going to finish this in the next twenty-four hours, Harry,’ said Bill, with a note of finality in his voice. ‘Right now we have to focus on the people here. Getting them on their feet again, and restoring some...some semblance of order. I want all of you to go to the hospital wing and help, okay? Please. Just do that for me.’

‘Of course,’ Ron heard himself say. His brain was humming with the horror of it all, with the need to DO something. Harry, for his part, looked down at his shoes, a guilty expression on his face.

‘I’ll warn you,’ said Bill. ‘It’s not pretty in there. Just...prepare yourselves, okay?’

‘We...we can handle it,’ said Ginny tentatively, and everyone else nodded. ‘Shouldn’t you go to the hospital wing, too, Bill?’

‘It can wait, Gin,’ said Bill. ‘Plenty of people need a lot more attention than me. And I know a few healing charms. I’ll be fine. Get to the hospital wing and help out there for now. You’ll know more later.’

Ginny nodded, and began to head off to the hospital wing. Ron clutched Hermione’s hand, and together, the rest followed Ginny toward whatever horrors were inside.

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The moment Ron entered the hospital wing, he hoped that--at the end of the night--someone would cast a Memory Charm on him, to wipe out all the images that assaulted his eyes.

He'd been a frequent enough visitor to the hospital wing himself over the years, but nothing could have prepared him for the level of...carnage he saw. Or the amount of blood. The smell was ghastly. He swallowed the urge to vomit as he, Hermione, Ginny, Harry, Susan and Neville made their way into the hospital wing.

Hermione gasped when they first entered the room, but very quickly she composed herself, and it was she who flagged down Madam Pomfrey. Pomfrey--normally so in command of her domain--looked frazzled. Her dress was covered with blood, her hair was half out of its chignon, and her face was tight with stress and exhaustion.

'Yes, what is it?' she asked sharply. 'Unless any of you is bleeding internally or has something broken, you'll have to wait your turn--'

'We want to help,' Hermione said briskly. 'Tell us what we can do.'

Pomfrey's face softened at once, and she let out a sigh of relief.

'Bless you, dear,' said Madam Pomfrey. 'Of course.' Her eyes went to Neville. 'Longbottom, you're good with herbal remedies, aren't you? Pomona told me you're her best student. I've got a few who could use some help from you.'

Neville blushed and nodded. 'O-okay,' he said slowly. 'Sure.'

'Miss Granger, I understand you and Miss Bones and Miss Weasley here are all quite skilled with Healing Charms,' said Pomfrey. 'You'll come with me. You two, Potter, Weasley, we have some people in that corner over there who need cleaning up and bandaging. Minor wounds, cuts, that sort of thing. You can do that, can't you?'

‘Yeah,’ said Harry and Ron together. Neither of them had ever really gotten the hang of Healing Charms. At least, not to the extent that was needed here.

‘Take these,’ said Pomfrey, shoving rags and bottles into Ron’s and Harry’s arms. ‘You’ll need to use some Cleaning Charms first, mind. Then apply the salves and wrap in the gauze. If anyone over there starts to bleed profusely, let me know.’

‘Right,’ said Ron, feeling slightly sick.

He and Harry made their way to the far end of the hospital wing; Ron tried to block out the sounds of moaning and weeping coming from the beds they passed. He hoped he wouldn’t pass out from seeing all the blood; he’d never had a strong stomach for such things.

All told, however, it wasn’t the worst thing. The students he and Harry attended to did not have especially serious injuries; most of them were younger students who’d been caught up in the initial panic of the attack. They’d reached the castle sooner but many had tripped and been trampled on in the ensuing panic. Dennis Creevey smiled sheepishly as Ron performed a Cleaning Charm on a nasty--but shallow--slash across the younger boy’s back, and didn’t even wince when Ron applied Wemply Wimbledon’s Wound Repair and dabbed on the gauze.

Ron looked up to see a morose looking Ernie MacMillan being attended by Harry. Harry was applying salve to a cut on Ernie’s bare foot; the Hufflepuff boy, meanwhile, lifted his arm, where it dangled loosely, like a slug.

‘Bloody Death Eater,’ he was groaning. ‘I dunno what he hit me with but my stupid arm feels like a noodle!’ His arm sloshed as he swung it. Ron grimaced and looked away.

‘Deboning Curse, I’m guessing,’ Harry said. ‘Lockhart tried to fix my arm with that once, and that’s just how my arm looked afterward.’

‘Are you telling me I got no bones in my bloody arm?’ Ernie cried.

‘Relax, Ernie,’ Harry said. ‘Pomfrey regrew my bones, she can regrow yours. But I’ll warn you: Skele-Gro tastes disgusting and regrowing bones hurts like hell.’

‘Lovely,’ said Ernie, rolling his eyes. ‘And just think. This morning all I cared about was your house winning the stupid Quidditch match.’

Ron turned to see Harry gaze at Ernie sadly.

‘Me, too,’ said Harry.

After that, nobody said a word. Ron and Harry finished cleaning up the rest of the students. Colin Creevey stared morosely at his broken camera as Ron patched up a wound on his shoulder. A third year girl called Natalie McDonald whimpered while Harry patched up her bleeding knee. Ron cleaned and bandaged an oozing but otherwise unserious scalp wound on a young Ravenclaw boy called Stuart Ackerley.

It went on for over an hour. More and more students were being brought in for treatment of minor injuries, and Harry and Ron very quickly found themselves being swamped. Just when Ron thought he might not be able to handle it another minute, Padma Patil and Hannah Abbott joined them. Hannah looked whey-faced and was very quiet, and Padma’s eyes were red and swollen.

‘Pomfrey sent us over here to help,’ said Hannah, her voice tired and hollow. She and Padma were both carrying piles of bandages and more wound salve. She nodded at Harry, and the two of them moved to a group of students who were crowding onto some beds nearby.

‘Thanks,’ said Ron, relieved. ‘Uh, there’s a small group over here, Padma. You and me could, uh--’

‘Sure,’ she said, nodding quickly, and Ron bit his lip when he saw her blink back tears.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked.

‘Fine,’ she said. ‘But...Parvati. She’s hurt. They hit her with something. I don’t...I don’t know what it was. Madam Pomfrey’s working on her.’

Ron swallowed. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said, for lack of anything else. He put a hand awkwardly on her shoulder, and for a moment, he wished--absurdly, considering the circumstances--that he’d been a better date for her at the Yule Ball. ‘Look, Padma...you don’t have to do this if you don’t want. Why don’t you go back and sit with Parvati--’

‘Can’t,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘Pomfrey kicked me out. You know how she is. Anyway, it’s better if I stay busy.’ She wiped a tear away and took a deep breath, as though steadying herself.

‘Right,’ Ron said, nodding. ‘I’ll just...let’s go.’

And on and on they went, for what felt like hours. More students came in, some injured, some healthy. Some of the healthy ones stayed to help, and very soon, the hospital wing was full to bursting, of students, of activity. It was alternately noisy, then quiet. Ron wasn’t sure which was worse. The noises were moans and cries of pain, and of weeping, and that disturbed him. But the silence seemed so ominous, somehow. And then there were the dead...

A few times Ron’s eyes strayed to the far right corner of the huge room. That area was dark, and the curtain was drawn round it, but even in the gloom Ron could see the faintest outline of shapes. Bodies. Unmoving, lifeless. He’d never seen a dead body before, and he didn’t know who those dead people were. Which students had died? he wondered. He scanned the room for familiar faces, but it was pointless. The whole school couldn’t fit into the hospital wing; surely some students had been sent back to their common rooms, to be guarded by the remaining Aurors. Part of Ron didn’t even want to know who lay behind that curtain. It seemed callous to hope that whoever it was, he didn’t know them. But he couldn’t help it. Death was easier to accept, he thought, if it was anonymous.

Another hour or so passed and the sun sank below the horizon, and lamps were lit. The noises and the activity began to die down in the hospital wing and Ron gave a sigh of relief as he patched up his final student. He was exhausted; his body ached; he hadn't seen Hermione in hours and he longed for the comfort of her arms around him. He wanted to sleep for a week.

He and Harry stood, gathering up their remaining gauze and salve, when Bill's voice boomed in the hospital wing.

'Students, teachers, and Aurors please report to the Great Hall immediately,' he said. 'We have an important announcement to make.'

Ron's stomach growled and he looked at his watch; it was past dinner time, and he realized that he was starving. Despite his queasy stomach, despite the horrors of the day, his appetite--perversely, he thought--was right on schedule.

He and Harry headed toward the exit of the hospital wing. They were met by Susan, Ginny and Hermione. All three of them were carrying their robes over their arms; Hermione had also removed her jumper. Their faces were covered with a sheen of sweat; Hermione had tied her unruly hair into a careless knot at the nape of her neck. Her tie was loose. Ron bit his lip. There was blood all down the front of her shirt.

'Are you okay, love?' he asked, taking her hand.

'It's not my blood,' she said.

'Shite,' he breathed.

She didn't even correct him. Her eyes were shiny with tears, but she didn't weep. 'I'm tired. We're all so tired.'

‘Hi,’ said a familiar voice behind them. They all turned to see Neville Longbottom. He, too, had taken off his robes and his jumper. His tie was loose, his shirt untucked, and his whole front was coated with blood and other stains Ron couldn’t identify. Herbal remedies, he guessed.

‘Bloody nightmare, this,’ said another voice, and Anthony Goldstein appeared next to them.

They all trudged to the Great Hall, their feet so collectively heavy on the stone floor that Ron thought they sounded like a herd of elephants.

They reached the Great Hall and found it draped in black. Flitwick was hanging black sashes along the windows. The meaning was clear. People had died today. The school was acknowledging it.

Ron felt his eyes and his throat burn. He wanted to feel angry, but he was too tired to feel angry.

Ron, Harry, Hermione, Ginny, Neville and Susan sat down at the Gryffindor table. They were joined shortly by Seamus, Dean and Lavender, whose eyes were swollen and red and whose face was stained with tears. Seamus clutched her hand and rubbed her back as she struggled not to cry.

Other students began to file in, all of them walking as though accompanied by a dirge. Ron’s eyes wandered to the staff table, and he saw Bill standing next to Dumbledore’s chair. Professor Sinistra and Firenze were on his left, Professors Vector and Flitwick on his right. Several Aurors were just behind them, all standing at attention, all of them looking half-dead on their feet just the same.

‘Attention, please,’ Bill called, and the hall went quiet.

Ron’s eyes fixed on his older brother.

Bill paused for a moment; Ron had never seen him look so exhausted. Bill took a deep breath, cleared his throat, and continued to speak.

‘In meeting with the faculty and our security forces,’ said Bill, ‘certain facts of today’s attack have come to light, that we wish to share with you all.

‘First and foremost, Headmistress McGonagall has been severely injured. She has been taken to St. Mungo’s for treatment. The other teachers have asked me to assume the position of Headmaster until Professor Dumbledore or McGonagall returns.’

Ron bit his lip. Bill, the Headmaster. A cruel irony, indeed. Ron wondered why Professor Flitwick or Professor Sinistra or anyone older didn’t take over the job. Hell, even Professor Snape...

Ron’s eyes narrowed. Where was Professor Snape?

‘The Death Eaters are no longer on the grounds and several were killed in the battle. New wards have been placed round the school and it is highly unlikely that Death Eaters can penetrate them again.’

This brought a few murmurs of relief, but for Ron, this was little comfort. The wards protecting the school before had supposedly been powerful ones, but they hadn’t held back the onslaught. He forgot about Professor Snape as Bill went on talking.

‘Unfortunately, our security forces report that the Dementors have stayed behind, and they’re currently hovering just inside the Forbidden Forest,’ said Bill.

A collective gasp rose up, and people began to talk all at once.

‘QUIET!’ Bill bellowed, and at once the talking ceased. Ron, for his part, hadn’t said a word. He simply stared at Bill and clutched Hermione’s hand.

‘As of now, the Dementors are not moving toward the school,’ said Bill. ‘But from now on, no student is allowed outdoors. We can only guarantee your safety from the Dementors if you stay inside.’

More murmuring, softer this time.

‘In communicating with authorities at the Ministry of Magic, it’s been determined that the Floo Network cannot be reopened at this time,’ Bill went on. ‘Communications via owl are also suspended, by order of the Ministry. It is believed at this time that letters could too easily go astray.’

The murmuring grew louder, and a sharp voice echoed through the hall.

‘How are we supposed to contact our parents, then?’ Zacharias Smith demanded. His arm was in a sling and he had a black eye. ‘What if some of us want to get the hell out of here?’

‘Calm down and let me finish,’ said Bill firmly. ‘I’ve posted a sign up list on my office door. The fireplace in my office is available to students who wish to communicate with their parents or guardians. Students must do so under the supervision of myself and an Auror. But the fireplace is available for communications only. No transporting. If anyone’s parents wish for you to come home, we will arrange it with a Portkey. Professor Vector has been placed in charge of Portkeys. Students wishing to go home must receive permission from their parents. We’ll need to monitor every coming and going in and out of this school, for security. Students who wish to stay are reminded to stay indoors at all times. As I said, we can guarantee your safety if you stay inside. The school will not be penetrated by any Death Eaters or Dementors.’

Bill’s voice, though tired, rang out firmly in the Great Hall, but Ron felt no comfort at all.

‘The previous rules regarding curfew are still in place,’ Bill continued. ‘Any students who wish to venture outside their common rooms must be accompanied by either a

teacher or an Auror. There will be absolutely no wandering in the corridors. You must carry your wands with you at all times, no exceptions. Lessons are cancelled for the next three days. After that, we expect all of you who choose to stay at Hogwarts to be in class.'

This announcement brought more angry protests, and once again Bill had to shout to restore quiet.

'I understand that some of you might not feel ready to return to class,' he said. 'But it is vital that all of you continue with your studies. It is vital that you all continue to live your lives and learn the skills that will protect you. Voldemort--'

Gasps as everyone heard the name, but Bill went on without stopping.

'--Voldemort wants all of us to panic, to lose hope, to live in fear,' said Bill. 'What happened today was frightening and horrible, and it is likely that there is more danger yet to come. But you will not honor the memory of those who fell today by hiding in your dorm rooms. Whether you leave Hogwarts or stay, all of you have a responsibility, to yourselves and each other, to keep living.'

At this, there was silence, but for quiet sniffing that came from those who were weeping.

Ron watched Bill for a moment, and felt his heart constrict when his older brothers' shoulders sagged, just slightly. Ron's eyes then moved to Harry, who was standing stock still, clutching Susan's hand; Harry's eyes were ablaze, and Ron swallowed. There was no mistaking the silent fury on his best friend's face. That fury sometimes frightened Ron.

'At this time,' said Bill, his voice shaking just slightly, 'I want us all to take a moment and remember...the people who died today. Five Aurors, all of whom you probably did not know by name, but who gave their lives to protect all of us at this school. Eugenie Branstone, Geoffrey Greengrass, Sarah Podmore, Marcus Turpin and Richard Bell. A moment of silence.'

Ron looked down at the floor. He'd never met any of those Aurors; he wouldn't have been able to discern their faces. They were simply a presence, walking at a distance behind students on their way to lessons, posting themselves at the back of classrooms, never interacting with anyone, simply there to protect and to defend. But they all had names, and families, and lives, and futures. The Death Eaters had taken that from them. Ron clenched his fists, and saw Harry do the same. The sounds of quiet sobbing pierced the hall, and Bill's voice rang out again.

'For the students who have died today, Euan Abercrombie, Victoria Frobisher, and Malcolm Baddock, a moment of silence.'

Ron bit his lip again. Vicky Frobisher. He'd known her. He'd competed against her last year for Keeper at the Quidditch try-outs. She'd been killed. Murdered. And Euan Abercrombie. Only a second year. Ron had no idea who Malcolm Baddock was, but he felt for that student as well.

'That's it, then,' said Bill. 'Right now I'd like students to line up with their house prefects. You will all be escorted back to your common rooms by Aurors, and you will remain in your houses until tomorrow morning's breakfast. The house elves have arranged to have your supper sent to your common rooms.'

The murmuring began again, and the sobs grew louder. Ron glanced round at the Gryffindors and saw Katie Bell crying, leaning on the shoulder of Andrew Kirke.

'Richard Bell,' said Hermione sadly. 'He was Katie's older brother.'

Ron nodded, and his heart and his throat hurt.

'We have to lead them out, Ron,' Hermione said softly.

'Right,' he said, and he cleared his throat. 'Gryffindors, this way!'

The Gryffindors, quiet but for the sounds of weeping, queued up cooperatively in a single file line and started out of the Hall. Hermione lead the way, accompanied by an Auror, and Ron brought up the rear, with another Auror behind him, and Harry in front of him. Susan had made her way back to the Hufflepuffs, and Ron noticed that they both looked bereft. They would not be able to comfort one another now, not with all the security in place, unless Harry was willing to risk using his Invisibility Cloak to see her.

Which he probably would, anyway.

Ron's eyes moved round the room again, and suddenly he remembered: Snape was not there. He was conspicuously, and suspiciously, absent. Ron glanced over at the Slytherins, and felt his stomach leap. Draco Malfoy was nowhere to be seen.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Picking Up Pieces

The students slowly filled into the common room, and took up positions on the sofa, chairs, the hearth rug, and on the staircases. Katie Bell was not there; Ron could only assume she had gone to her own Head Girl quarters, probably with Andrew, who'd comforted her in the Great Hall and with an Auror to guard them.

Susan had somehow managed to blend in with the crowd and find her way in; she was clutching Harry's hand and they stood next to one another by the fire, but nobody questioned her presence. Ron certainly wasn't going to say anything; it made sense for Harry and Susan to be together now, after all that had happened.

Ron clenched his fists nervously. He had to tell the others about Malfoy and Snape, but he couldn't do it with all the students crowding the common room. They all looked scared and tired, but nobody seemed to want to go to bed.

'Hermione,' Ron said in a low voice, and he tugged her gently closer to him. 'I have to tell you something.'

'What, now?' said Hermione, sounding surprised.

‘Yes, now,’ he hissed. ‘It concerns Harry and the rest of us. But we need to get this lot into bed. Can we just, I dunno, pull rank as prefects and get them upstairs?’

Hermione bit her lip. She looked conflicted, and Ron immediately understood why. She hated the idea of abusing her position, and forcing everyone to go upstairs just so she could hear what Ron had to say seemed like an abuse of power.

‘Hermione, I wouldn’t ask if it weren’t important,’ Ron whispered. ‘Please. And look at it this way. McGonagall’s out and Katie’s in her room and she can’t deal with this stuff right now. So, aren’t we sort of--the default people in charge?’

Hermione looked up at him. ‘I suppose you’re right,’ she admitted. ‘Okay. Maybe--maybe I should make some sort of announcement?’

‘I’ll do it,’ he said.

‘Are you sure?’ she said quickly. ‘I can--’

‘Excuse me!’ Ron said out loud, without waiting for Hermione to finish. ‘Listen up! I know everyone’s been through a lot here today, and it’s been bloody awful--’

‘Ron, don’t swear!’ Hermione hissed.

‘I mean, it’s been really bad,’ said Ron quickly. ‘But we’re all of us knackered and it’s going to be a long day tomorrow, what with helping clean up the school and--and helping Madam Pomfrey and everything. So, I think we should all turn in, okay?’

‘How are we supposed to sleep after all that?’ said Dennis Creevey. ‘I know I’m going to have nightmares!’

‘Me, too!’ cried a fourth year girl.

‘So am I!’ hollered Seamus.

‘Quiet down!’ Ron yelled. ‘Look, if anyone thinks they’ll have trouble sleeping, I’ve got some Dreamless Sleep Draught I never used; you’re welcome to it, all right?’

‘You’ve got enough for the whole house, do you?’ said Geoffrey Hooper.

‘Oh,’ said Ron, realizing that he probably didn’t have more than enough for six or seven students, at most. ‘Well, uh--’

‘I’ve got some, too,’ said Hermione.

‘Me, too,’ said Harry.

‘And me,’ said Ginny.

This news brought several murmurs of relief, Ron included.

‘Okay, then,’ said Ron. ‘Uh, boys can just ask Harry and me and girls can ask Ginny and Hermione. Just, uh, go on upstairs and we’ll be up in a few.’

Gradually, the students began to filter up their respective staircases. Ron noticed Lavender climbing the boys’ staircase with Seamus, but said nothing. Lavender was badly shaken by what had happened to Parvati; she’d want to be near Seamus, no doubt. Ron didn’t care, really--he wanted Hermione with him, too. Everything had become so...dire. As if they were all living on borrowed time.

Susan, Harry, Neville, Ginny and Hermione all lagged behind with Ron, and soon the common room was empty, but for them.

And one little girl, a first year by the look of her, who wouldn't budge, but stood in the middle of the room with tears streaming silently down her face.

'Ron,' Hermione whispered nervously.

'It's okay--' Ron began, addressing the girl, but she began to sob out loud.

'I wanna go home!' she bawled.

'Ron, do something!' Hermione hissed. Ron shot her a look of desperation and searched his brain for a way to comfort the girl. He was barely aware of his feet moving toward her. When he reached her, he instinctively knelt down--she was tiny and he would look huge and intimidating standing at his full height.

'Hey, hey,' he said softly, and he put a hand carefully on the girl's small shoulder. 'None of that, yeah? You're a Gryffindor.'

'Yes,' she mumbled, tears spilling down her cheeks.

'What's your name?' Ron asked. Maybe if he distracted her that would help.

'L-Lizzie Towler,' she whimpered.

'Are you a first year?' he asked.

‘No,’ said the girl, a bit defensively. ‘Second year.’

‘Oh. Of course,’ said Ron, blushing a bit. ‘Right. Well, Lizzie, you’ve got to get permission to go home from your mum and dad.’

The girl began to sob again. Ron groaned inwardly and quickly tried to repair the damage.

‘It’s okay,’ he said quickly, trying to make his voice sound soothing. ‘You can talk to your mum and dad tomorrow, okay?’

Her sobs quieted and she looked at him pathetically.

‘You promise?’ she said, in a small voice.

Ron swallowed, and then he thought of something.

‘You bet,’ he said, and he grinned. ‘You know Professor Weasley?’

The girl nodded.

‘Well, he’s my brother,’ said Ron. ‘Did you know that?’

Lizzie nodded again, and she smiled and gave a kind of half-sob, half-giggle. ‘He looks like you. Except he’s even taller than you and he’s got really cool hair and this really cool earring and he’s really smart and he’s really, really cute.’

Ron heard Hermione and the others snigger behind him.

‘Yup, that’s Bill, er, Professor Weasley all right,’ said Ron. ‘Well, you remember what he said in the Great Hall, right? About how you could use his fireplace to call home?’

‘I think so,’ said Lizzie. Her sobs were now soft sniffles, and Ron realized that whatever he was doing was working.

‘Okay,’ he said, running with this theme. ‘Tomorrow morning, first thing, you and me will find Professor Weasley and ask him if you can use his fireplace to call home, yeah?’

‘I c-can call my mum and daddy?’ Lizzie said shakily.

‘Yeah,’ said Ron. ‘Absolutely.’

‘You’ll take me to his office and everything?’ said Lizzie.

‘Sure,’ said Ron.

‘Okay,’ said Lizzie, and she looked much more relaxed now. She had stopped crying and was wiping her eyes.

‘So, you just go on to sleep now, okay?’ said Ron. ‘You want your rest, because, uh, because you’ll want to get up real early to talk to your mum and dad, right?’

‘Okay,’ she said again, and she smiled weakly. ‘Thanks.’

‘No problem,’ said Ron, feeling very relieved that he’d managed to calm her down. Lizzie turned and started up the girl’s staircase.

Halfway up she turned and looked right at Ron.

‘My big brother Kenneth knew your brother, Percy,’ she said. ‘He said Percy was a real stick in the mud and that all prefects were grouchy gits. But for a prefect you’re quite nice.’

Harry barked out a laugh that he turned into a cough.

Ron blushed. ‘Uh, thanks.’

And with that, Lizzie Towler marched up the rest of the stairs and into the girls’ dormitories.

Ron turned back to the others, all of whom were laughing quietly behind their hands.

All but Hermione, who was gazing at him with something rather like awe.

‘What?’ he asked, lowering his voice.

‘Nothing,’ she said, but her mouth curled into a small smile.

‘Tell me,’ said Ron.

‘You just surprise me sometimes,’ said Hermione. ‘In a good way.’

Ron looked down at his shoes and willed his ears not to turn red again, but they did anyway.

‘Yeah, well, she was upset,’ he mumbled.

Harry’s laughter quieted and he patted Ron on the shoulder. ‘That was brilliant, mate,’ he said. ‘But I think you’re way cuter than Bill.’

Ron smacked Harry on the back of the head, and for a moment, the mood was light, and they nearly forgot that they’d been attacked that day, and that several people had been murdered.

Nearly.

And then Ron remembered what he wanted to tell them all.

‘Malfoy’s gone,’ he said. ‘And so is Snape.’

Hermione gasped.

‘I know,’ said Harry heavily.

‘Couldn’t...couldn’t Snape have gone because he had to?’ said Hermione. ‘You know, for his...his spy mission?’

‘Maybe,’ said Harry, but he sounded doubtful. ‘But Malfoy’s gone, too.’

‘Maybe his dad’s finally decided Draco can join the Death Eaters’ Club officially,’ said Ron darkly.

‘Ron, we don’t know that--’

‘We have to assume it, Hermione,’ said Harry firmly. ‘I didn’t get any flashes of Malfoy being abducted. Not like Luna and Eddie.’

‘And how about Eddie?’ said Ginny. ‘Wonder what they want with him?’

‘Maybe...maybe he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time?’ Neville offered timidly.

‘Do you believe that, Neville?’ said Harry.

Neville blushed. ‘Not really, no,’ he mumbled.

‘We’ve got to find them,’ said Harry.

‘“We”, Harry?’ said Hermione sharply. ‘Do you honestly think we’re going to go after them--’

‘So we can tell Bill and the others,’ said Harry defensively. ‘No, Hermione, I don’t think we should try this on our own.’

‘How can we possibly find out where they went?’ Neville asked.

‘I can find out,’ said Harry darkly.

‘Harry,’ said Susan, her voice full of worry, ‘isn’t there any other way?’

‘No, Sue,’ said Harry, and his voice was suddenly sad and tired. ‘I wish there was. But no.’

‘What way?’ said Neville fearfully.

‘Never mind now, Neville,’ said Hermione gently, putting a placatory hand on his arm. She glanced at Harry with an expression of tight worry across her face, but she said nothing.

‘No, I’ll tell Neville,’ said Harry. ‘I’m going to try and contact Voldemort.’

Neville’s face went white and he made a kind of strangled squeak before he could speak. ‘Are you sure you should d-do that?’

‘I don’t mean contact him, like, hi, Voldemort, how’re you doing, how’s it going with all the murder and mayhem,’ said Harry at once. Then he blushed and looked down at his shoes. ‘You know how...how I sometimes wake up from a nightmare and...and get sick and stuff?’

‘Yeah,’ said Neville, also looking away.

‘I have this connection, with him,’ said Harry. ‘With Voldemort. I’ve been training how to use Legilimency so I can sort of...read his mind, I guess.’

Neville’s eyes went wide. ‘Wow,’ he said. ‘So...so you’re gonna do it again. To find out where Vol-Voldemort took Luna. And Eddie. Is...is that it?’

‘That’s right,’ said Harry.

‘You think you can?’ said Neville, half-anxious and half-eager.

‘I’m not sure, honestly,’ said Harry. ‘I think he’ll be expecting me to try and he’ll probably fight me on it. But I have to try.’

‘And then you’ll tell Bill whatever you find out, right?’ said Hermione.

‘I’ll tell Bill, yeah,’ said Harry, but he wouldn’t look in Hermione’s eyes.

‘Promise us, Harry,’ said Hermione firmly.

‘I will,’ said Harry, looking up at her. But his hands fidgeted.

‘Do you...do you need any help with that, Harry?’ said Neville, his face very red. ‘I mean, I’m not sure if I can do anything but...but you know, if you need me to do something, I’d like to--’

‘Thanks, Neville,’ said Harry. ‘You...you’ve helped out already. All those times you got McGonagall and stuff.’

‘Right,’ said Neville, and he looked down at his feet. After a moment, he announced, ‘I’m going to turn in.’

And he headed up the boys’ staircase out of sight.

‘I’m going up, too,’ said Ginny, yawning and stretching. Without a word she hugged Ron, and he hugged her back. They’d never really done too much hugging, but right now it seemed like the only appropriate thing to do. She gave him a weak smile and headed up the girls’ staircase.

‘We should get upstairs,’ Ron said to Harry, after a long moment in which nobody spoke. ‘Hand out that sleeping draught.’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Hermione. ‘I’ll just, um...well. Good night, then.’

‘Wait,’ said Ron at once, taking her hand in his, then stopped. He looked at Harry. He looked in Hermione’s eyes and she seemed to understand what he wanted. She nodded.

‘Hermione’s, uh, with me tonight, if that’s okay,’ said Ron.

‘And...Susan’s with me,’ said Harry.

‘If that’s okay,’ said Susan quickly.

Ron considered. No, he didn’t think anyone should be alone tonight, if they could help it.

‘Fine by me,’ said Ron. ‘Though...I saw Lavender go up with Seamus, so they might be there, too.’

‘Sounds like a slumber party, doesn’t it?’ said Hermione, giggling awkwardly.

‘Harry, I really need to shower,’ said Susan, tugging at her blood-stained school robes.

‘You can use our bathroom, Susan,’ said Hermione. ‘I could use a clean-up, too. Why don’t we pass out the sleeping draught and...and then we’ll come up to your room later, after we’ve showered?’

‘Okay,’ said Harry.

Susan nodded.

‘Right,’ said Ron. ‘I’m gonna shower, too, I think. Feel disgusting.’

He and Harry were still in their Quidditch things; Ron knew he must smell horrible-- of sweat and dirt and blood.

Hermione nodded, smiled at him, and with Susan, ascended the girls’ staircase, and Ron and Harry went up the boys’.

Upon entering, they found Neville climbing into bed; Dean as pulling on a t-shirt.

Seamus and Lavender were nowhere to be seen.

‘Where’s Seamus?’ Ron asked.

‘He and Lavender are talking in the bathroom,’ said Dean. ‘She’s really freaked out about Parvati.’

Harry looked at Dean, then at Ron, and they both shrugged. It wasn’t as if Harry and Ron hadn’t had private conversations in weirder places than a bathroom.

In the next instant, there was knock on the door.

‘Come in!’ Harry called. The door open, and other Gryffindor boys began streaming in.

Ron and Harry gave small doses of the Dreamless Sleep Draught to several of the younger boys; Ron focused on pouring a small measure of the sleeping draught in Colin Creevey’s cup; Colin downed his dose and grimaced.

‘Why is every medicine that’s supposed to be good for you have to taste like shite?’ he complained.

‘So you won’t get addicted to it,’ said Ron. ‘At least, that’s what Madam Pomfrey told me. You’d better get to bed now, Colin, or you’ll be nodding off where you stand.’

‘Right,’ said Colin, his eyelids already heavy. He stumbled his way out of the sixth year boys’ room and back to his own.

After about ten minutes, Ron and Harry finished handing out the sleeping potion. Neville took a little and fell asleep almost at once, so deeply that he didn’t even snore. Dean, too, had taken some of the potion, and was sleeping so heavily he began to drool a bit.

Harry yawned and stretched, and began to pull of his Quidditch uniform. Ron followed suit.

‘Blimey, I smell,’ said Harry, wrinkling his nose.

‘No worse than me, I’d wager,’ said Ron, averting his eyes from the bloodstains on his Quidditch jumper.

They finished undressing in silence, then fetched their bath towels and bath robes, which they put on, and picked up their soap and shampoo.

Ron couldn’t wait to stand under the shower; he planned to make the water as hot as he could stand it, and relished the idea of scrubbing his skin pink.

Harry and Ron both entered the sixth year boys’ bathroom to find that one of the showers was running; the room was filled with steam and the sound of water running. And the sounds of something else. Voices. Two of them. One male, one female.

‘Oh, yeah, right there...don’t stop...’

‘Mmm...like that?’

‘Lower, lower...oh, god...’

Ron and Harry stared at one another; the voices belonged to Seamus and Lavender.

‘What the--’ said Harry, and he started round the corner. Ron tried to pull him back, but then found his own curiosity got the better of him.

The shower at the far end of the bathroom was quite obviously in use; the curtain was drawn and water was running. They couldn’t see anything at first, but then the steam cleared a bit, and they saw the silhouette of two people, clearly engaged in something other than conversation.

Ron and Harry hurtled back round the corner; Ron was torn between wanting to laugh out loud--which seemed wildly inappropriate, considering what had happened today--and being entirely horrified at having caught someone he knew in the act.

‘Should we say something?’ Harry whispered.

‘Maybe we should come back in a few minutes,’ Ron suggested.

‘You think it’ll be over by then--‘

At that moment Lavender screamed, and Seamus made a kind of incomprehensible growl.

Ron and Harry raced from the bathroom and back into the bedroom. The door to the bathroom swung shut behind them. For a moment neither one of them said anything.

‘Bloody hell,’ said Harry. ‘That was...weird. Not weird, but...okay, it was weird.’

‘We’ll just, uh, wait...until they’re out of the bathroom, shall we?’ said Ron.

‘Definitely,’ said Harry. ‘Definitely, let’s wait.’

‘Can’t be too long, I don’t think,’ said Ron. ‘They sounded...well...uh, kind of close--‘

‘Ugh, Ron, let’s just...not go there, yeah?’

‘Right. We’ll just wait.’

They waited.

Fifteen minutes later Seamus and Lavender emerged from the bathroom; Lavender had on Seamus's bathrobe and her hair was freshly washed. Seamus was wrapped in a towel. The moment the four of them saw one another, they all blushed.

'Oh,' said Seamus and Lavender together.

'Uh, bathroom's free,' Seamus said.

'You two are done--' Ron began, and Harry smacked him on the back of the head, and Lavender flushed puce.

'We were talking,' she said, in a stiff voice.

'We're done talking,' said Seamus, and before the situation could get any worse, Harry and Ron bolted for the bathroom.

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Ron did indeed turn the water on in the shower as hot as it would go. He and Harry made a point to use the two shower stalls furthest from the one Seamus and Lavender had been...talking in.

After several minutes of scrubbing himself almost raw, Ron heard the other shower shut off; Harry was finished with his shower. Ron followed suit, shutting off the water. He reached out from behind the curtain, felt for his towel, grabbed it, and dried off, rubbing hard at his skin. He wished he could scrub off every layer of it and start all over, with brand new skin. Anything to get the smell of blood off him, which logically he knew wasn't there anymore, but which in his mind kept filling his nostrils.

He wrapped his towel round his waist and stepped out of the shower to see Harry leaning over the sink, wrapped in his bathrobe. His hair was wet and sticking up in all directions, and he was looking in the mirror and staring at his scar with a tired expression on his face.

‘You okay, mate?’ said Ron.

Harry said nothing for a moment.

‘Harry?’

‘I was just thinking,’ said Harry. ‘About this.’ He put a finger to the scar on his forehead and traced it. ‘Dumbledore called it a blessing and a curse. Funny, but I don’t really see the blessing part yet.’

Ron said nothing. It was times like this that he felt most useless to Harry, that he wished he himself could understand, even if only for a moment, what it felt like to have the fate of the whole world on his shoulders. Maybe then he could help Harry better.

‘I have to kill him, Ron,’ said Harry. ‘But I don’t know how to do it. How the bloody hell am I supposed to do it?’

‘Dunno,’ said Ron. ‘But...but you won’t be alone.’

Harry turned to him, and Ron swallowed as he saw the green eyes film over with unshed tears.

‘Thanks,’ said Harry. And without another word, he turned on the tap and began to brush his teeth.

Ron watched him for a moment, then began to brush his own teeth. There was no need to say anything more. In that moment, as swiped his toothbrush across his teeth, he let himself accept his fate.

And that fate was to be with Harry Potter to the end. No matter what that end might be.

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The dorm room was dark; the curtains to all the beds shut. Harry and Susan were asleep. Or not--Susan had done a Silencing Charm on Harry's bed. All was quiet from Seamus's bed as well. Dean and Neville both snored softly.

Ron stared at the ceiling, wide awake. He was exhausted, but it was as if he was too tired to sleep.

Hermione, too was awake. For an hour, they had lain side by side in silence. She didn't curl up next to him; she lay on her back and held his hand at her side. She had performed a Silencing Charm and an Impervious Charm on the bed, but even as she did it, Ron knew he was in no mood to fool around.

'Today was horrible,' she whispered at last.

Ron didn't want to talk about it, but he was too tired to tell her he didn't want to talk about it. Instead he heard himself say, 'Yeah, it was.'

Hermione turned on her side and looked at him. She was dry-eyed; Ron had half-expected her to break down after everything. It was usually her way, and he had grown used to it. This was new.

'I can't even cry,' she said. 'I feel like...like I should. But I can't. It's like...I've cried myself out. Or like I've gone past something.'

He didn't say anything, because he didn't know what to say, but he did have an idea of what she meant. It was probably like that same acceptance he'd felt before, in the bathroom, while brushing his teeth. It didn't erase the fear--far from it--but it made things seem just a bit simpler.

He brushed a curl away from her face. It was clear she wanted to talk. Neither of them could sleep. It was just as well.

'Are you scared?' Hermione asked. 'Of dying?'

Ron looked at her for a long moment and considered. His fingers were absently stroking her hair, her cheek.

'Not anymore,' he said. 'I mean, I don't think so, anyway. Are you?'

'A little,' said Hermione. 'But just...because it's the unknown, and because I wouldn't want to leave people behind.'

'Right,' said Ron.

'And I'm scared of losing people,' she said.

Ron nodded and looked away. He hadn't thought about losing Hermione since that awful night in the hospital wing, last year. He didn't want to start thinking about it now. He wouldn't. He forced himself to look at her.

‘Harry has to fight him,’ said Hermione, and now her eyes filled with tears. ‘Again. After all that.’

‘I know,’ said Ron heavily.

‘It isn’t fair,’ said Hermione. ‘He didn’t ask for this.’

‘Nobody did,’ said Ron.

‘I just wish...I knew how to help him,’ said Hermione, as a single tear escaped and ran down over the bridge of her nose.

‘I think...’ said Ron slowly, brushing the tear away with his thumb, ‘...all we can do is just, uh, be there with him, when it happens.’

‘That’s not enough,’ said Hermione, a bit desperately. ‘There has to be SOMETHING we can do. Some spell. Maybe there’s a book--’

‘Hermione,’ said Ron, and he put a finger to her lips. ‘Please. I can’t tonight--it’s too much.’

Hermione nodded. ‘I’m sorry. I just...I hate this.’

He turned on his side and looked at her. ‘Me, too.’ He brushed more tears from her eyes, and she leaned in and kissed him.

It was a very soft, light sort of kiss, but it was different; Ron sensed it at once, but he couldn’t place or begin to describe just HOW it was different. The touch of her lips on his was gentle, and yet...there was an intensity of feeling behind it, in the way that she

breathed, in the way that her hand moved to the back of his neck and held him so firmly there.

She kissed him again, harder, opening her mouth against his, and the world began to spin. He hadn't meant to get into this tonight. He was tired, he was afraid, he was emotionally raw, and yet her mouth on his, and her tongue...they were like air.

They kissed hard for a long time, and Ron moved over her and their hands traveled, and their shirts disappeared, and he felt her hands going to places they'd never gone before, and he gasped. Things were happening fast now, and it was desperate, and he had to stop it before it got out of hand. She wasn't ready...

'Hermione,' he said, panting. His skin was alive and burning. 'Stop, please...'

'Why?' she asked. She was panting, too, and her skin was flushed and she was so beautiful with her hair spread out on the pillow. He couldn't take it; he grabbed her wrists and pulled her hands away from his flesh.

'I can't...if you keep doing that...' Ron gasped. 'I won't...be able to stop.'

For a moment neither one of them said anything, or moved, but for the rising and falling of their chests as they fought for breath. Hermione's lips were red and swollen, and she licked them and spoke.

'I don't know...if I want you to stop,' she whispered.

Ron's eyes--before unfocused--went wide.

'Wha--you mean...NOW?' he whispered.

Hermione bit her lip and looked away. 'I don't know,' she said. 'I just...I just want to forget all that bad stuff and have something good to fall asleep to. Do you...know what I mean?' She looked up at him earnestly.

'Yeah,' said Ron, and he meant it. It was so tempting. Just to give in to everything he felt and to make love with her and forget about all the horrible things that had happened today. People had died today, and though they themselves had survived it, they might not make it past tomorrow. And yet...

'Hermione,' Ron said slowly, 'I may regret this, but...but I don't think we should tonight.'

Hermione looked at him with an inscrutable expression.

'Why not?' she asked.

'Because...because we're not really alone, for one thing,' he said. 'I mean, we've got these charms on the bed but...I dunno...it'd be weird, don't you think, having our first time in here when...when Harry and Susan are in the next bed?'

'We could die tomorrow,' she said, touching his chin.

'That's not a reason to rush this,' he heard himself say. 'I...I don't think you're ready, Hermione, and...and if we did it before you were ready you'd regret it and...and I'd hate that and I'd hate myself. We can't take it back once it's done.'

Even as he said it, a small part of him was kicking himself mentally. He knew it was the right thing to do but he was still in a bit of pain down there and sometimes that pain had a tendency to linger. Why did being noble have to be so uncomfortable?

She looked at him for a long time. He felt naked in her gaze, and not simply because he was only half dressed. The wheels in her mind were turning and she was thinking.

‘You’re right,’ she said finally. ‘You’re right. We shouldn’t.’

He let out a breath, mostly of relief. ‘Good,’ he heard himself say, and he lay back on the pillows and tried to concentrate on ridding himself of his little, or not so little, problem. He pulled the blankets over him to hide things. She pulled on her pyjama top and snuggled up to him; it didn’t help his problem much.

‘Ron,’ he heard her whisper.

‘Yeah?’ he murmured.

‘Can I do something else instead?’ she said.

‘What’s that, love?’ he said sleepily.

‘I could...help you,’ she said. ‘With something.’

‘What?’ he asked.

‘You’ll see,’ she said, and he heard the bed squeak slightly as she shifted, and he felt her hands again, on his skin moving lower, and he snapped awake.

‘Hermione,’ he said, his voice hitched. ‘What are you...bloody hell...’

For now he felt her hand on him, beneath his pyjama pants.

‘We can’t...’ he gasped. He opened his eyes and looked at her.

‘We’re not,’ she whispered, still moving her hand slowly.

‘I know...but...oh, god...’

‘Does it hurt?’ she asked nervously, and she stopped moving her hand.

‘No,’ Ron breathed. ‘God, no...but I don’t want you...to do that if...if you don’t want to...’

‘I want to...’ she whispered. ‘I want to.’

He tried to say something else but then her hands were moving again, and her mouth was fluttering over his collarbones, his chest, and lower, and he couldn’t think of anything at all.

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Later, he was sleepy again, but it was totally different. It wasn’t sleepiness borne of exhaustion but of something else entirely. Awe? Reverence? He wasn’t quite sure.

‘Wow,’ he said, staring up at the ceiling. ‘That was...wow.’

‘It...it was okay?’ said Hermione, sounding anxious.

‘Way, way better than okay,’ said Ron, grinning and blinking. He turned to face her. ‘Wh-where did you learn how to do that?’

‘A book,’ she said, shrugging, but she was clearly trying not to smile.

‘There are books about that?’ said Ron incredulously.

‘There are books about everything, Ron,’ said Hermione primly. ‘Which you’d know if you ever opened one.’

‘I definitely will now,’ said Ron, and he grinned. ‘Useful things, books.’

‘I keep trying to tell you that,’ she said.

He turned on his side, and was serious now. He was overcome by everything, by what had just happened, by what they’d survived today, and everything they’d been through since they met. He looked at her and realized that he had forgotten what it felt like not to know her.

She looked at him and bit her lip.

‘What?’ she said.

He moved closer to her and brushed her curls from her face.

‘I love you,’ he said. He hadn’t said it to her since that day before Christmas, when they were standing on the staircase, when everything had changed for them. The words seemed so inadequate. But he meant them.

‘You’re not just saying that because I--’ she began.

‘Shut it,’ he said, putting a finger to her lips. ‘Don’t be thick.’

She smiled, and threaded her hand in his.

‘I love you, too,’ she whispered.

They slept.

### *Chapter Thirty: Whereabouts*

Ron entered the Room of Requirement to find it empty; it was configured in the fashion it had been back in fifth year, for the secret D.A. meetings. Books lined the shelves.

Something about the emptiness of the room struck him, and he pulled his wand from his robes. There was no one else in the room, and yet it was as if the air itself was pulsating with...something.

Ron glanced over at the bookshelves, and saw everything neatly stored and stacked there. Except for one book, which was out and resting on a nearby console table. The book was shut.

Ron walked slowly over to the book, his eyes scanning the room as he went. As he drew nearer to the book, he heard it. Whispering. He whirled round, pointing his wand out.

‘Who’s there?’ he snapped, and his voice was so loud it echoed in his ears. The whispers went on. Ron couldn’t understand what they were saying; perhaps the Hogwarts’ ghosts were playing a trick on him, trying to scare him. He scowled and chose to ignore them.

He turned back to the book and walked slowly toward it, compelled by some unseen force to look at it. The whispers grew louder with each step he took toward the book.

At last his eyes came to rest on the book. And then he heard something else. A faint humming. It was coming from the book.

He reached out a hand and made to touch the book, but as his hand drew nearer, the book began to vibrate. He pulled his hand away sharply.

‘Blimey,’ he heard himself whisper, and yet his voice echoed as though he’d shouted.

The whispers intensified, and he caught two words: *Fata Morgana*...

Latin, he thought. Or Greek, maybe? He never could really tell the difference. But it was an old language. A dead language. He wasn’t sure how he knew this, but he did. The book was still humming and vibrating.

*Apertum...apertum...*

Open. Somehow, Ron knew what the Latin or Greek or whatever it was word meant. He didn’t know if he wanted to open it. But he couldn’t stop himself; his hand, as though of its own will, reached out for the book again. As it hovered above the book the whispers became loud and jumbled, but he still heard one word: *Apertum*.

He lowered his hand to the cover of the book, and the whispering became one long hiss. He didn’t want to open the book, but he couldn’t stop himself. He pulled back the cover...

Light flashed in his eyes and suddenly he was face to face with Luna Lovegood.

‘You should not have done that, Ronald,’ she said, but her voice was not hers, and her blue eyes were dark, almost black, and they glittered with malice.

Ron backed away, shaking his head; he tried to speak but he couldn’t. His wand was in his hand but it was useless to him. The room began to shift and change and Ron stumbled, and then he heard a banging noise. He stumbled again and looked up to see Dobby the house elf smacking his head against the side of the bookshelf, muttering ‘bad Dobby!’ to himself all the while. His head bounced off the wooden shelf, back and forth.

Knock...knock...knock...

Ron blinked and opened his eyes.

Knock knock knock.

Someone was knocking on the door. He sat up slowly, getting his bearings. He was in his room. Hermione was fast asleep next to him, curled up tightly. Ron shook his head to clear it and pulled open the drapes of his four poster. It was just before dawn. All the other beds’ curtains were pulled shut.

He shook his head again, trying to remember the bizarre dream. Something about him being in the Room of Requirement, and Luna. He’d seen Luna. She’s scolded him about something.

Knock, knock.

‘Coming,’ Ron called, as quietly as he could. He pulled on his pyjama shirt and padded to the door, opening it.

‘H-hi,’ said a small voice.

Ron looked down and saw Lizzie Towler looking up at him fearfully. He’d promised he would walk her to Bill’s office.

‘Hey,’ he said. ‘You shouldn’t really be up here, you know.’ He was exhausted but somehow he managed not to make it sound like he was really rebuking her.

‘I know,’ she said, her lower lip trembling. ‘But I couldn’t sleep. Can we--’

‘Sure, sure,’ said Ron, forcing his eyes to fully focus. ‘Just give me a second...’

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Ron dropped Lizzie off at Bill’s office twenty minutes later. They’d been escorted the whole way there and back by an Auror, a young witch who walked with slight limp but whose expression betrayed nothing of the horrors she’d lived through. She held herself with an almost military discipline.

Ron came back to the common room, again accompanied by the Auror--who revealed when he asked her that her name was Alexa Webberly. Somehow, learning her name had been very important to him. He never wanted to take for granted the people who were risking their lives to guard the school.

He entered the dormitory to find it as quiet as when he’d left it. The sun was starting to appear on the horizon. Ron decided he’d try and get a little more sleep before facing the day.

He gently pulled back the curtains of his four poster to find Hermione sitting up in bed. She was crying.

‘Wha--?’ he began. He quickly pulled his curtains shut as he climbed onto the bed.

She looked up at him with her tear-stained face. Ron sat down quickly beside her.

‘What’s wrong?’ he asked.

Her response was to smack him on the shoulder, hard.

‘Ow!’ Ron hissed. ‘What was that for--’

‘Ron Weasley, don’t you ever do that again!’ she hissed back.

‘Do what?’ he asked, flabbergasted, as he rubbed at his sore shoulder.

‘Leave without telling me,’ she said. ‘I woke up and you weren’t here and I looked everywhere up here for you and I went back to my room and you weren’t there and--and I checked the common room and I couldn’t find you--and when I tried to go out there was only one Auror and he wouldn’t leave his post and come with me to look for you...’

‘Hermione, I just went to Bill’s office,’ said Ron quickly. ‘To drop off that little girl, Lizzie. Remember? I told her I’d take her to see Bill so she could use his fireplace.’

‘At five o’clock in the morning?’ said Hermione tearfully.

‘Yeah, well, it was a bit earlier than I would have liked,’ said Ron, shaking his head. ‘But that’s when she showed up here, banging on the door. Hermione, I’m fine. I was escorted the whole way there and back by an Auror. I had my wand. Everything’s okay.’ He put an arm round her and pulled her close.

She nodded and looked up at him, her face sheepish.

‘I’m sorry,’ she sniffed. ‘I shouldn’t have lost my head like that. Everything was so awful yesterday and I suppose I just overreacted...’

‘It’s okay,’ said Ron, and he kissed her on the forehead. ‘It’s nice, actually. Knowing that my girl is all worried over me.’

She gave him a gentle shove and wiped her eyes. ‘Nice for you, maybe.’ Then she put her arms round him and sank against him, and they held each other for a few minutes, without speaking.

‘Ron,’ she said at last, ‘I know...I know it’s mother hen-ish of me but...but will you promise to always tell me where you’re going, at least for a while?’

Ron looked down at her. ‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘But you have to do the same for me.’

‘Okay,’ she said. They moved beneath the covers, wrapped up in each other, and fell asleep.

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An hour later, they awoke again, with sunlight pouring into the room. Ron blinked and pulled back his bed curtains and looked outside. The day was glorious: a bright blue sky with only the occasional white, fluffy cloud. Everything was in bloom. The lake shimmered and sparkled in the sunlight.

The irony of the beautiful weather struck Ron hard. The school was in mourning, and everyone was trapped indoors, as this bright, beautiful day beckoned everyone out. After just a minute of gazing out the window, Ron remembered Sirius, and wondered

what it must have been like for him, to be stuck in a house he hated, without even the benefit of stepping outdoors for a few minutes.

Gradually, the sixth-year boys' dormitory awoke in full. Lavender, Susan and Hermione all left together to go and change; Hermione announced that Susan could borrow something of hers to wear until she had a chance to get back to Hufflepuff. With security so tight it would be difficult to get an Auror to escort Susan back to her own house.

Ron washed and brushed his teeth. As he was splashing water on his face he felt it: stubble.

He came back into the bedroom to pull on jeans and a t-shirt (no need for uniforms today, not if they were all going to be helping out in the hospital wing or cleaning up the mess just inside the entrance hall). Harry was up and his whole body was crackling with energy.

'Hey,' he said, lacing up his shoes.

Ron looked at him for a moment and felt unease begin in the pit of his stomach.

'Hey,' he said back.

'Sleep okay?' said Harry.

'Okay, I guess,' said Ron, and he thought about his dream, but it didn't seem like the kind of thing to bring up at the moment.

'Me, too,' said Harry. 'I thought Voldemort might try to get into me but he didn't.'

‘That’s good, isn’t it?’ said Ron.

‘No, it’s not,’ said Harry.

‘Harry, why aren’t you dressed?’

‘I have to go after him,’ said Harry. ‘Today.’

‘No,’ said Ron at once.

‘Ron, I HAVE to,’ said Harry. ‘It’s the only way. If he’s not getting in my head it means he doesn’t want me to know what’s happening. At least not yet--not until it’s too late.’

‘Shit, Harry,’ said Ron. ‘I don’t like that at all.’

‘I don’t either,’ said Harry sharply, then he took a deep breath. ‘Sorry. But Ron, even though he didn’t get inside my head last night, I can’t help but feel that things are happening, wherever he is. Bill was right--Voldemort can’t get what he wants from that book in a day, but he’s working on it right now. I know it. I have to find out where he is and where he’s got Luna. And I wanna know about Snape and Malfoy. We don’t have much time.’

Ron shook his head. ‘You shouldn’t do this without someone there to keep an eye on you.’

Harry shook his head back. ‘I can’t connect as well if I’m under surveillance.’

‘Harry--‘

‘Ron, please,’ said Harry desperately. ‘Don’t you see? He attacked the Ministry and then he attacked Hogwarts and made this huge mess so he could buy himself some time. That means that whatever poison he’s planning to make must require some time to, I dunno, develop. But if I don’t find out where he is soon he’ll have what he needs, and it’ll all be for nothing.’

Ron started to speak, then stopped, and looked down. Harry was right. All the violence that had happened in the past several days, all the people who’d died or been hurt...if they couldn’t find Voldemort in time, and stop him, all the people who’d fought so hard against his Death Eaters would have died for no reason at all. It was a lousy choice: Harry, or the whole damn world.

‘Okay,’ said Ron. ‘What can I do?’

‘You’re going to the hospital wing, right?’

‘Yeah,’ said Ron. ‘Figure I’ll just keep doing what we started yesterday.’

‘Okay,’ said Harry. ‘Tell anyone who asks that I’m not feeling well and that I’m sleeping.’

‘Not everyone is going to buy that, Harry, and you know it,’ said Ron at once. ‘Hermione--’

‘You have to convince her, Ron,’ said Harry desperately. ‘Tell her that I’m really worn out because of my scar hurting yesterday. Tell her I got some potion from Pomfrey to help with the pain and that I took it and I’m sleeping it off.’

Ron closed his eyes. ‘I hate lying to Hermione.’

‘I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t--‘

‘I know.’ Ron ran a hand through his hair. ‘I’ll do it.’

Harry let out a breath. ‘Thanks. And Bill, tell Bill--‘

‘Yeah,’ said Ron, holding up his hands. ‘Just...bloody hell, Harry. Be careful, okay?’ He paused. ‘I can’t believe I’m agreeing to this.’

‘You’re a damn good mate, you know that?’ said Harry, grinning weakly.

‘Now you’re just trying to butter me up,’ said Ron, rolling his eyes.

‘That’s a disturbing mental image,’ said Harry, and Ron swatted him on the back of the head. They laughed.

And then there was a long silence.

‘I’d better get downstairs,’ Ron said finally. ‘You want me to bring you some breakfast? Maybe you should eat something.’

‘I’ve got some leftover Honeydukes stuff,’ said Harry.

‘That’s healthy,’ said Ron.

‘This from a bloke who eats his weight in chocolate,’ said Harry. They laughed, and then there was another silence. Ron stood and crossed to the door. He put his hand on the knob and stopped. He didn’t want to leave. He was scared to leave Harry alone.

‘I’ll be okay, Ron,’ said Harry. Ron swallowed the lump in his throat and turned to look at the boy who’d become his sixth brother.

‘You’d better be,’ he said.

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Hermione was indeed dubious when, at breakfast, Ron told her the story about Harry, and as they left the Great Hall, she pressed him on it. But Ron held firm, and she backed down. Not because Ron’s story was all that convincing, but because by then they had entered the hospital wing, and there were other things to do and think about.

The first thing Ron noticed was that the corner of the room that had been closed off--the corner of the room that held the bodies of the dead--had been emptied sometime in the night. He swallowed. Somehow, the absence of those bodies gave their deaths a finality that seeing them had not. He wondered briefly what Vicky Frobisher’s parents must be feeling, and then shut his eyes and tried to think of something else.

Neville had arrived ahead of them. He was in a far corner of the wing, sitting quietly over a cauldron that was simmering gently over a blue flame. Next to him, perched on a table, were several plants, fungi, and powders.

He looked up and waved, then went right back to his cauldron, stirring whatever was inside it with a large silver ladle. Neville looked like almost an entirely different person right then; confident and patient and not at all nervous. Ron was surprised--Neville had never been good at Potions, but there he was, brewing something, and looking quite in command of the whole procedure. Ron watched as Neville reached up, snapped two leaves off a spiny looking plant, and crumbled them into the cauldron.

‘Weasley.’

Pomfrey’s voice brought him back to reality.

‘Yeah?’ he said. ‘Er, I mean, yes?’

‘We’ve got some students who could stand to have their wounds cleaned and redressed,’ said Madam Pomfrey. ‘Can you and Miss Patil handle that?’

She was holding more bandages and salve. Padma Patil was standing behind her, looking exhausted.

‘Sure,’ said Ron, and he glanced at Padma, who nodded.

‘Very good,’ said Madam Pomfrey, and she handed Ron the bandages and salve. She turned to Hermione, Susan, and Ginny.

‘Girls, I could use your assistance in brewing some Blood Replenishing Potion,’ she said, and without another word, she headed off in the direction of her office.

‘See you later, Ron,’ said Hermione, and she gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

‘Bye, love,’ Ron said, as she hurried off. He turned to Padma, who blushed.

‘You...you’re quite happy with her, aren’t you?’ she said.

‘Oh,’ said Ron, and he blushed, too. ‘Well, yeah. I am.’

They started toward the other end of the wing to set up their ‘nurse’s station.’

‘You kept staring at her at the Yule Ball, you know,’ said Padma, and her lips curled into a small smile.

Ron blushed even deeper. ‘Is that right?’

‘Yep,’ said Padma. ‘I’ll bet you can’t even remember what color robes I was wearing.’

‘I can,’ said Ron at once, but of course he couldn’t. He decided to try, anyway. ‘Uh, purple, right?’

Padma giggled and shook her head. ‘Turquoise.’

‘Right,’ said Ron. ‘I knew that.’ He paused. ‘You know, Padma, I...I’m sorry I was a bad date.’

‘It’s okay,’ she said, as they began to spread out their bandages and salve. ‘I wasn’t all that nice to you, either.’

‘That’s okay,’ said Ron, as he stacked up extra bandages. ‘Uh, how’s Parvati doing?’

‘Parvati’s going to be okay,’ said Padma, and her voice shook slightly, but she sounded cheerful all the same. ‘I stayed with her all night, and she finally woke up early this morning. That’s why I look like death warmed over. She’s got a few broken ribs. Madam Pomfrey still isn’t sure what they hit her with, but...but she’s going to be okay.’

‘That’s good,’ said Ron. He started to say something else, but then students began to show up, and he became busy with cleaning and redressing wounds. Ernie MacMillan appeared and Ron was given the unpleasant task of cleaning the gash on his foot. The Hufflepuff prefect had his arm in a sling.

‘Bones grow back, Ernie?’ Ron said, trying not to hold his nose as he dabbed Wemby Wimbledon’s Wound Repair on Ernie’s foot.

‘Just about,’ said Ernie. ‘Potter was right. Skele-Gro is foul, and it hurts like bloody hell.’

‘I can imagine,’ said Ron, as he wrapped Ernie’s foot in fresh gauze.

‘Hey, where is Potter, anyway?’ said Ernie, looking around.

‘Not feeling good,’ said Ron, in a voice that clearly indicated that was all he was going to say. Ernie, for all his pomposity, seemed to get the hint. A few minutes later he hobbled away and Ron took a few deep breaths, trying to get the smell of Ernie’s foot out of his olfactory memory.

It went on for another few hours, and Ron fell into it fairly easily. But at the back of his mind was a buzzing that wouldn’t go away. Even as he cleaned yet another wound and wrapped it in clean gauze, he wondered about Harry. He was alone in Gryffindor tower, so far as Ron knew. If something went wrong, nobody would hear Harry if he tried to call for help.

Another hour passed and Ron felt his nerves stretch to the breaking point. It was taking way too long. Harry should have finished whatever he was doing by now. Something was wrong.

I should at least check on him, Ron thought, and when there was a lull in his activities, he stood up.

At that moment, Harry walked into the hospital wing. His eyes met Ron’s.

‘Ron?’ said Padma, looking up from tending to Stuart Ackerley. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘Nothing,’ said Ron. ‘Just going to have a stretch. I’ll be right back. Are you okay here?’

‘I’m fine,’ she said.

‘Good,’ said Ron, still looking at Harry, whose eyes were bright. ‘I’ll be right back.’

He met Harry halfway, and was about to ask him what he’d seen, when Pomfrey interrupted them.

‘Ah, you’re up and about, Potter,’ she said. ‘Feeling better?’

‘Yes’m,’ he said quickly. ‘I can help out if you like.’

‘Why don’t you go with Mr. Weasley, then,’ Pomfrey said, waving her hand.

Harry nodded without looking at her, and he and Ron moved back toward the back end of the hospital wing. They stopped several feet away from where Padma was re-organizing bandages.

‘Tell me,’ Ron demanded. ‘Tell me you’re normal Harry and you haven’t gone barmy on me.’

‘I’m fine,’ said Harry, but his eyes were so bright and glittering he looked almost feverish. ‘I did it.’

Ron's jaw dropped. 'What?' He couldn't believe it.

'I found out where Voldemort is,' said Harry. 'And Luna.'

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The lunch break came, and the students helping Madam Pomfrey filed out of the hospital wing and headed for the Great Hall, with Aurors flanking them all the way. Ron noticed that they all looked tired. Most were bruised, had cuts on their faces, and a few were walking with noticeable limps. But there was an almost military precision to their gait; they kept their eyes fixed ahead and clutched their wands tightly at their sides. They looked as if they had not slept at all the night before, and Ron realized they must be running purely on adrenaline. He hoped that some of them, at least, would have a chance to rest.

Hermione glanced up at Ron, then at Harry. Harry had not told Ron anything more, but the moment the lunch break hit, he approached Hermione, Susan and Ginny quietly and spoke to them for a few moments. Neville watched with interest, but didn't interfere.

Lunch was subdued. Several dozen students were absent; Ron wondered if they'd all gone home to their parents, or if some were simply skipping the afternoon meal.

Ron himself was not hungry, but he forced himself to eat. Mainly, his stomach was jumping because of what Harry had said. Now that they were all sitting at the end of the Gryffindor table, Ron could tell that Harry was nearly bursting to tell them more, but he refrained. Near the end of the hour, he got up, and Ron, Ginny, Susan and Hermione followed him as he strode over to Bill, who was sitting at the staff table and had just finished up a conversation with Professor Vector.

'Bi--Professor Weasley,' said Harry.

Bill smiled tiredly. 'Call me Bill.'

‘Bill,’ said Harry, ‘I have something to tell you. It’s urgent.’

Bill studied Harry for a brief moment.

‘Let’s go to my office,’ he said, and he led the group out of the Great Hall. They were just moving into the corridor when Neville came up behind them.

‘What’s going on?’ he asked.

Ron and Harry turned to face Neville.

‘Oh,’ said Harry. ‘Well...we just...’

Neville gave Harry a penetrating look, and Harry sighed. ‘All right, come on, Neville.’

They trooped behind Bill and were followed by an Auror all the way to Bill’s office. He unlocked the door with his wand, and walked in; the others came in closely behind him. Bill went to his desk and flopped into his chair. He looked entirely worn out.

‘All right,’ he said, looking at Harry. ‘Tell me.’

‘I know where Voldemort is,’ said Harry firmly. ‘Where he’s taken Luna, and the book, and what he’s doing.’

Bill sat up slowly in his chair. ‘How--‘

‘I made contact today,’ said Harry. ‘This morning.’

‘Funny,’ said Bill coolly. ‘Ron told me you weren’t feeling well this morning--‘

‘Ron lied,’ said Harry. ‘Because I asked him to. I spent the morning trying to make contact with Voldemort, and I did.’

Bill sat back again, but not before shooting Ron a dirty look. Ron flushed and looked down at his shoes.

‘Okay, Harry,’ said Bill. ‘What is it you think you’ve learned?’

‘I don’t “think” I’ve learned anything,’ Harry said sharply. ‘I know.’

‘How can you be sure?’ said Bill. ‘He’s messed with your head before--‘

‘I know,’ said Harry again, more firmly. ‘I know.’

‘All right, Harry,’ he said. ‘I believe you. First you’re going to tell me where Voldemort is, and what he’s doing, and where Luna is, and then you’re going to explain to me why I shouldn’t think that he’s playing with your head again.’

Harry gazed at him for a moment, then nodded.

‘Go ahead,’ said Bill.

‘Right,’ said Harry, and he took a deep breath. ‘They’re at the Riddle House. Tom Riddle’s grandparents’ house. It’s in this burg called Little Hangleton.’

‘How do you know about--‘

‘I’ve seen the house before,’ said Harry. ‘The summer before my fourth year, I had a dream. There was this big old house, and it was deserted, and there was somebody inside. It was Voldemort, and Wormtail, and a great big snake. Voldemort was talking about me, about killing me, about this big plan to kill me. He was telling Wormtail about...about what he’d do, what he DID do at the end of the Triwizard Tournament. And his snake, it was sort of slithering around, and then the snake went out, and came upon this old man. A Muggle. And the old man followed the snake into the room and found Voldemort there, and he killed the old man.’

‘What does this have to do with--‘

‘In the room where the old man died,’ Harry went on, ‘there was a huge fireplace. And a chair. One single chair. It was a big room, like a master bedroom, only it had no furniture in it, but for this one big chair. And upstairs just now, I saw the same room, the same house.’

‘How can you know this house is in Little Hangleton?’ Bill asked.

‘Because Tom Riddle murdered his father and grandparents there,’ said Harry. ‘I saw their graves, when I was in the graveyard.’

‘I don’t quite--‘ Bill began, clearly confused.

Harry gave a kind of exasperated snort that cut Bill off; Ron grimaced, but then Harry looked at him and bit his lip, and Ron understood. Harry had never really talked about what had happened at the end of the Triwizard Tournament.

‘Look,’ Harry said slowly. ‘At the third task, in the Triwizard, Voldemort had Barty Crouch, Jr. jinx the trophy to be a Portkey.’

‘I remember,’ said Bill.

‘So...so Cedric and me, we got pulled into this cemetery,’ said Harry. ‘And...and Wormtail shows up and k-killed Cedric and then he tied me up and he did this whole...ceremony thing. To give Voldemort his new body. I saw these graves that said Riddle. And then...later I found out that Voldemort had murdered his father and grandparents. They were found in the Riddle House, this...this big mansion...they were Muggles...nobody knew how they died...they didn’t have a mark on them...and the house was in Little Hangleton, up the hill from the graveyard where...where they killed Cedric.’

Bill gazed at Harry for a long moment; Harry was breathing heavily and clutching Susan’s hand.

‘You’re sure that’s where Voldemort is now?’ said Bill slowly.

‘I’m positive,’ said Harry. ‘I saw that room again, in my mind, when I was upstairs. I know what he, what they’re doing with Luna.’

At this Neville gave a kind of low moan.

‘What are they doing?’ said Bill, his eyes fixed on Harry.

‘They’re using her,’ said Harry. ‘Voldemort’s using her, to make something. A potion. A poison. Something really deadly.’

‘You saw Luna?’ said Bill.

‘Yeah,’ said Harry. ‘She looked weak, beat up. They’re probably torturing her.’

‘And the book?’ said Bill. ‘Does that figure in? Did you see it?’

‘No,’ said Harry, ‘but Voldemort said that tomorrow night “things would be ready” and that “she” could complete the spell. So that must mean that whatever they’re making won’t be ready until tomorrow, and that there’s some spell in the book that Luna has to cast over the stuff.’

Bill tensed his fingers and looked carefully at Harry for a long moment.

‘So?’ said Harry.

‘Harry,’ said Bill, ‘look. I want to believe you. I do. But...Voldemort knows you. How do you know he didn’t plant this in your head deliberately, like he did last year?’

‘He didn’t!’ Harry cried. ‘Bill, I swear--’

‘Peace, Harry,’ said Bill tiredly, holding up his hands. ‘Look, you have to consider it, okay? You’re a damn good Legilimens at this point, but he’s done it a lot longer than you. And he knows how to manipulate you.’

‘I think I learned my lesson on that last year,’ said Harry stiffly.

‘I think you did, too,’ said Bill. ‘Okay, say Voldemort’s not sending you a false signal. Let’s accept that. But then we have to consider whether he’s deliberately sending you the truth. He could be showing you where he is in order to flush you out.’

Harry pursed his lips. ‘I thought of that,’ he said.

‘And?’ said Bill.

‘I think that’s exactly what he did,’ said Harry.

This brought a gasp from everyone, including Ron.

‘Harry, you can’t--’ Hermione began.

‘It’s me he wants,’ said Harry. ‘I mean, yes, he wants to go through with his world domination plans, of course, but he wants, no he *needs* to kill me. “Neither can live while the other survives.”’

‘Exactly,’ said Bill. ‘So you see why you can’t--’

‘No, I don’t see,’ Harry interrupted.

‘What are you saying, Harry?’ said Bill slowly, and Ron felt his stomach tighten with dread. He had a good feeling what Harry was about to say.

‘I’m saying...maybe it’s time I faced him,’ said Harry. ‘Once and for all.’

## *Chapter Thirty One: A Plan and a Journey*

The silence was so absolute Ron might have heard a feather drop. Everyone was staring at Harry, whose eyes were fixed defiantly on Bill.

‘Harry,’ said Bill slowly, and this seemed to touch off a maelstrom of protests.

‘Harry, you can’t!’ said Susan and Hermione.

‘It’s too dangerous,’ said Neville.

‘You could die!’ cried Ginny.

‘Quiet!’ Bill snapped, and everyone obeyed. He gazed at Harry and spoke. ‘I don’t think...it’s wise, Harry.’

Harry stared at Bill for a moment, and Ron saw the other boy’s back stiffen, his jaw tighten. An explosion was imminent.

‘Why not?’ Harry asked, through clenched teeth.

‘Because you’re not ready,’ said Bill at once. ‘I think even you know that.’

‘And just when,’ said Harry, breathing hard, ‘do you reckon I WILL be ready? When Voldemort finishes making that poison? When he sends out Wormtail and whoever else to spread the poison to Muggles and Muggle-borns and everyone else who opposes him? When half the bloody population is wiped out?’ His voice rose with every word.

‘Harry, listen--’ Bill began.

‘No, YOU LISTEN!’ Harry yelled. ‘You bloody well listen to ME! Don’t you get it? He’s never, ever going to stop unless I kill him! Don’t you remember what the prophecy says, Bill? I’m the only one who can kill him!’

‘Harry, you don’t know HOW to kill him!’ Bill retorted. ‘You don’t know how to use an Unforgivable Curse! You don’t even have it in you, and you know it!’

‘Maybe there’s another way,’ Harry countered. ‘A way to do it that doesn’t involve using the Killing Curse.’

‘You’re willing to take that chance--your own life--for a “maybe”?’ Bill said.

‘It’s not just my life!’ Harry bellowed. ‘Goddammit, Bill! Look at what he’s done! To this school, to the Ministry! He’s out there killing people right now! How many people are going to die before it’s all over? I don’t want this--I NEVER ASKED FOR IT! But it’s MINE, isn’t it? My responsibility, my...my bloody DESTINY!’

By now, Hermione, Susan and Ginny were all crying; Neville was whimpering; Ron felt sick; Harry looked white with rage. Only Bill was remotely calm.

‘You could die,’ he said quietly, ‘and if that happens, we all die.’

‘If I do nothing, we’re dead anyway,’ said Harry heavily, and his voice broke, and his eyes filled with tears, but he fought them.

‘Harry,’ Susan said, in a tear-choked voice, and she grabbed his hand.

‘No, Sue,’ said Harry, pulling his hand away. ‘I can’t get away from it...it was going to happen sooner or later. I guess...I guess it’s sooner.’

Susan gave a small sob, and Harry softened and pulled her close and held her.

‘I’m sorry,’ he whispered, and Ron saw one tear streak down the other boy’s face. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Harry,’ said Bill softly. ‘You can’t go--‘

Harry looked up sharply. ‘Yes, I can,’ he snapped. ‘If I have to fly on my bloody broom I’ll go.’

‘Let me finish,’ said Bill, holding up his hands. ‘I was going to say, you can’t go facing Voldemort alone.’

Nobody said a word. Ron clutched Hermione’s hand and stared at his older brother.

‘What do you mean?’ said Harry.

‘I mean,’ said Bill, ‘that if you’re determined to see this through, you’ll have me with you. And anyone else I can scrounge up to come along.’

‘Bill!’ said Ginny. ‘But--‘

‘No,’ said Harry at once. ‘That wouldn’t work. You can’t--‘

‘Harry, either you let me and some other Aurors come with you or--‘

‘You let ME finish,’ said Harry.

Bill eyed him coolly. ‘Okay.’

‘I was going to say,’ he said, ‘first, thanks. Second...Voldemort expects one of two things to happen. I know him. Either I show up alone, because I’m so...noble and stupid and whatever, or the Ministry shows up with dozens of Aurors who attack the house with guns, er, wands blazing. If the first thing happens, yeah, I’m dead. But if the second thing happens he could panic and kill Luna. Or a lot of people will end up dying needlessly.’

‘So what are you suggesting?’ said Bill.

‘I’m saying, we have to sneak in,’ said Harry. ‘It’s the only way.’

‘All right,’ said Bill.

‘And we can’t have too many people along,’ said Harry. ‘Or it’ll be harder to keep things, er, covert.’

Bill looked at him carefully, and nodded. ‘Fine. This is what’s going to happen. Harry, you and Ron and everyone else will go back to Gryffindor Tower. I’m going to contact Kingsley and ask him to round up five of his best Aurors and Portkey them here. We’ll make all the arrangements.’

Ron stared at Harry, then at his brother. He couldn’t believe it. Bill and Harry were plotting to infiltrate Voldemort’s very house. Ron looked at Hermione and gripped her hand tighter; he felt weak. This was happening too fast. And why were they talking as if Ron wouldn’t be included? Ron had promised Harry to be there for him, but Bill and Harry were making plans as though Ron were not going to be involved.

‘We have to go tonight,’ said Harry.

‘Harry--‘

‘Bill, I swear, it has to be tonight, or we’ll be too late,’ said Harry desperately.

Bill paused for a moment, and then nodded.

‘Right, then,’ he said. ‘I want all of you to stay in Gryffindor Tower until I meet you there later. I’ll make your excuses to Madam Pomfrey--things are clearing up in the hospital wing, anyway. Nobody is to say a word about this to anyone. Once I’ve secured the Aurors tonight, I’ll come and fetch you, Harry.’

‘Oh you will?’ said Ron, letting go of Hermione’s hand and finding his voice at last. ‘And what about me, eh? I promised Harry I’d be with him when...when it happened.’

‘No, Ron,’ said Bill promptly. ‘Absolutely not.’

‘Bill!’ said Ron angrily.

‘I am Acting Headmaster of this school, Ron,’ said Bill, standing up and glaring at him. ‘My decision is final. It’s bad enough I’m taking Harry into that kind of danger. I’m not going to risk other students, as well.’

‘I’m of age!’ Ron protested, wondering if THAT argument would cut any ice.

‘Ron, we may not come back from this,’ said Bill sharply. ‘If I don’t make it...I’m not going to do that to Mum. I’m not going to risk you or Ginny.’

‘Bill’s right, Ron,’ Harry begged. ‘Please. I can’t...I’m not trying to be a hero, here, okay, but...I can’t let you or Hermione or Susan or anyone else go there...’

‘Harry...’ Susan sobbed, and she clung to him hard, and he shook his head, and held her back, but his eyes stayed on Ron.

Ron felt burning behind his eyelashes and willed the tears away.

‘I promised you, Harry,’ he said, his voice strangled.

‘I know,’ said Harry sadly. And once again, the understanding borne of six years of friendship, of brotherhood passed between their eyes, and there was nothing more that could be said. Ron’s heart hurt. His head hurt. His eyes hurt. He suddenly found the room closing in on him, squeezing his chest and making it difficult to breathe.

‘Ron...’ said Harry slowly.

‘I have to go,’ Ron said, his voice barely functioning.

‘Ron...’ Bill began, but Ron wasn’t listening. He only knew that he had to leave that room, that oppressive place where he’d just watched his friend agree to face Voldemort, where he’d realized that Harry might never come back.

Ron shoved the door of Bill’s office open.

‘Ron!’ he heard Hermione, and then Bill call out. The Auror outside the door tried to stop him from leaving, but Ron shook off the smaller wizard’s grip on his arm and ran. He didn’t know where he was going, he only knew he had to get away. As far away from everything as he could.

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The Astronomy Tower was empty; Ron chose it because it was the one place in the entire castle in which one could technically be outside. He chose it because he figured people would be less likely to look for him there, seeing as there were strict orders NOT to go outside.

He sat against the stone wall, next to some covered telescopes. The afternoon was dwindling and the sun beat down on him. He could feel his face reddening; he'd have a nasty sunburn. He didn't care. The urge to cry rose up in his chest over and over again, and every time, he pushed it back down. Part of him knew this was silly--a good cry would probably make him feel slightly better, at least. But he wouldn't cry, because if he did, he wasn't sure he'd be able to stop. He might drown on his own tears.

Instead, he thought about everything, and fought back his tears. He thought back to that first day, on the train, on their way to Hogwarts. Ron had been excited, but mostly nervous. He was the youngest Weasley son. What difference could he possibly make? Would he be able to make friends? What if he got put in the wrong house? And then he went into a compartment to find another eleven year old boy with messy black hair and a scar on his forehead. The boy didn't seem to understand why or care that he was famous; he knew nothing of the wizarding world. But he'd been nice to Ron. And when Draco Malfoy had appeared, and told Famous Harry Potter that it wouldn't help him to hang out with Ron Weasley, Harry had given Malfoy the brush off. Harry had chosen him, Ron Weasley, plain, poor, average Ron Weasley.

It's just like Hermione, he thought. I can't remember what it was like before I knew Harry. And after tonight...I may never see him again.

Ron pounded his fist into the sun-warmed stone floor. The pain shot through his knuckles, but he didn't care about that, either. He punched the floor again, and his knuckles scraped the stone. He punched the floor one more time, and his knuckles split open, and blood began to flow. He did nothing to staunch the wound. Maybe if he bled a bit, it could wash some of the anger and despair out of him. Maybe.

It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair that he was seventeen and couldn't help his best mate, his brother, the one person in the world who understood him as nobody else did, not even Hermione.

I'm useless, he thought. Bloody useless. I can't even look at him now. Because I'm useless, I failed him, and he's going to leave tonight and he's going to die.

'Ron.'

Her voice made him look up.

He swallowed, and forced his voice through the lump in his throat. 'Hermione.'

Her eyes were red and swollen with crying; her hair was half out of its ponytail. She looked him over and saw his bleeding hand.

'Ron, you're hurt!' she cried, and she hurried to his side and took his bleeding hand in hers.

'It's nothing,' he mumbled.

'It's not nothing,' said Hermione, and she took her wand from the pocket of her robes and started to clean and heal the wound. Ron watched her, felt the warmth of her fingers as she gently ran them over the light scar on his knuckles, which he hoped would be permanent.

She looked up at him. 'Have you been up here all this time?' she asked.

Ron nodded; he didn't trust himself to talk.

She moved closer to him and sat up on her heels. 'Ron, why?'

Ron looked down at his hands. He couldn't look at her. Everything was so close to the surface.

'Because,' he said.

'That's not a reason,' said Hermione gently, but Ron heard the quiver in her voice. He took a deep breath, and felt her take his hands in hers.

'I'm worthless,' he said, still not looking at her. 'I can't help him...'

'None of us can,' said Hermione sadly.

'I made a promise, Hermione,' said Ron, his voice angry now, but he still didn't look at her. 'A promise. I told him I'd be there. I told him he wouldn't be alone.'

'H-he won't be alone,' said Hermione, but her voice was weak.

'But we...I...won't be there,' said Ron, and he finally looked up at her, and saw that she was crying, and he felt the moisture in his eyes. 'He--he's going to die...and Bill...and...and I can't do anything...and I won't be there...'

Whatever else he might have said was lost as she pulled him into her arms and his resistance came crashing down. She didn't say a word as she held him, as his tears soaked her robes.

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They walked back to the common room an hour later; Ron learned from Hermione that the Aurors had not been required to go looking for them. For one thing, they were needed at their posts. For another, Bill seemed to think Ron needed time alone.

Ron was grateful for the privacy, of course, but in walking back to the common room, his hand in Hermione's, he realized that being alone hadn't been what he needed after all. He needed her, just as he needed Harry, and after purging his own soul of his despair, he came to a decision. Come hell or high water, he wasn't going to be left behind when Harry faced down Voldemort. They entered the common room to find it empty. Most of the younger Gryffindors, including the Creeveys, had gone home that day; the rest were either upstairs or in the hospital wing.

Ron and Hermione took a seat next to one another on the sofa, and within a few minutes, they were arguing about Ron's choice.

'Ron, what are you going to do, wrestle Harry to the ground and make him take you along?' said Hermione shrewdly.

'I dunno what I'm going to do, but I'm going to do something,' said Ron firmly. 'I'm not staying behind. No way, no how.'

'Well, then,' she said briskly. 'If you're going, I suppose I'll have to go as well.'

'What?' said Ron, appalled. 'No way you're going!'

'Oh no?' said Hermione, a challenge in your voice. 'And why not?'

'Because you're not!' said Ron. 'I'm not going to let you!'

‘It’s not your decision!’ said Hermione. ‘You can’t order me around, Ronald Weasley!’

‘In this case, oh yes I can,’ said Ron sharply. ‘If you think I’m going to let you go anywhere near Voldemort, you’re mad.’

‘Oh, I get it,’ said Hermione hotly. ‘This is because I’m the girl, isn’t it? Can’t let a GIRL go! Honestly, Ron, don’t be such a chauvinistic cretin!’

‘I’m not!’ Ron protested.

‘I may be a girl but I CAN take care of myself!’ said Hermione loftily.

‘I know you can!’ said Ron. ‘I never said you couldn’t, you’re the smartest witch in the school--‘

‘Well, then, I should go along, shouldn’t I?’ she said, folding her arms across her chest. ‘If I’m so smart, you might find me useful, I think.’

‘Hermione, you’re not going,’ said Ron. ‘And that’s final.’

‘Dammit, Ron!’ she said, clenching her fists. ‘You are NOT going and leaving me here like some pathetic little damsel locked up in a tower!’

‘That has nothing to do with it, I told you!’ said Ron, groaning. ‘My god, ‘Mione, I love you and if anything happened to you I think I’d kill myself!’

‘And you think I don’t feel the same way?’ Hermione shot back. ‘Look, if you’re going to be there for Harry, then so am I. You and Harry are my two best friends in

the world and you're my boyfriend and...and if this is the end of it I'm going to be with you both. And there's nothing you can do to stop me.'

'You think I can't put a hex on you to keep you here?' said Ron, folding his arms across his chest.

'There is not a hex you could put on me, Ron Weasley, that I can't break,' she said smugly, 'and you know it.'

Ron glared at her for a moment, and then his shoulders sank. 'Yeah, you've got me there.'

'Fine,' said Hermione triumphantly. 'So it's settled. I'm going.'

'Fine,' said Ron, throwing up his hands in defeat. 'But if we live through this, Hermione, you're in trouble.'

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Dinner time came, but Ron and the others ate in the common room; Bill had arranged for house elves to send meals there. Harry was there, and Susan--who seemed to have been given permission by Bill to stick close to Harry as much as she wanted. Ginny and Neville also sat quietly, listlessly picking at their food. Seamus and Lavender had made an appearance, but then went out to the hospital wing to visit Parvati, who was also being visited by Dean.

Nobody spoke. They didn't know when, but at some point, Bill would appear and announce that it was time for he, Harry, and whatever Aurors they could get to go to the Riddle House. Ron and Hermione said nothing about their plan to join them.

Not that they had any sort of plan, per se. Ron figured that Harry and the others wouldn't make the journey by Floo Powder. Nobody could Apparate there from the

school. Brooms would take too long. It was almost certainly going to be a Portkey that would take Harry to where Voldemort was hiding.

As such, Ron and Hermione agreed that they would have to find a way to latch onto the Port Key at the right moment. Hermione wondered how they would be able to get through the half dozen Aurors surrounding said Portkey, and Ron said simply that he'd barrel through whatever Aurors he had to, to get to the Portkey. Hermione didn't like the sound of this, but in the end agreed that it was the only way.

The anticipation, however, was making Ron restless. He couldn't eat; he kept bobbing his knee up and down. Hermione gave him a sharp look, and he stopped, but a few minutes later, he'd start up again. Harry had said nothing about Ron fleeing Bill's office; he'd said nothing at all, in fact. He just sat silently next to Susan on the sofa and held her hand.

The sun was sinking in the distance, casting a golden-pink glow on the common room, when Bill finally entered. As one, Ron, Harry, Hermione, Susan, Ginny and Neville stood.

'Hey,' said Bill, and at once Ron sensed that something was wrong. Bill's face was tight with worry.

'What's up?' said Harry, with a look on his face that showed he, too, knew something was off.

'Bad news,' said Bill.

'There's a surprise,' said Harry dryly.

'Kingsley can't spare any Aurors at the moment,' said Bill heavily. 'There was a Death Eater attack at Gringott's. They set a bunch of Dementors on the goblins, sent them down into the vaults. It's a bloody mess; Aurors are down in there trying to round up all the Death Eaters, and the dead goblins. You know how that place is like a bloody maze. At this rate, the Aurors will be cleaning up for days.'

‘So,’ said Harry, ‘we take a few Aurors that are here and go.’

‘I can’t do that, Harry,’ said Bill. ‘We need them here to protect the school. I just spent the past twenty four hours convincing hundreds of worried parents that the school is safe, but it’s safe because the Aurors and those security trolls are here. But we don’t have enough Aurors to spare any, and if I go that’s one less fully qualified professor.’

‘What are you saying, Bill?’ said Harry, looking wary.

‘I’m saying we can’t do this,’ said Bill. ‘Not tonight.’

‘No!’ Harry shouted. ‘No. You promised! We HAVE to do this, Bill. I’ve seen flashes of him all day--he’s hurting Luna, he’s making her put together the poison. When he’s done with her he’ll kill her, and he’ll set that poison loose on the Muggles! We can’t give up now!’

‘Harry, I can’t spare any Aurors to protect you!’ said Bill. ‘You said it yourself--you can’t go there alone!’

‘You’d be with me,’ said Harry.

‘That’s not enough,’ said Bill.

‘Bill, we have to,’ said Harry desperately. ‘Snape’s gone, did you notice that? And Malfoy, too! They could be in on it. And it’s not just Luna we have to get back. He’s got Eddie Carmichael...’ Harry’s voice dwindled.

‘Harry, I can’t protect you on my own,’ said Bill.

For a moment, nobody said anything. Ron looked at Harry, but the black-haired boy was too busy gazing desperately at Bill. Ron then looked at Ginny, whose hazel-brown eyes were glittering with anticipation. Then at Neville, whose whole body was tensed, ready for action. And at Susan, who was clutching Harry's arm but looking very determined.

'Well, then,' said Ron, 'I guess I'll just have to go with Harry, too.'

'And me,' said Hermione at once.

Ginny jumped onto the theme. 'Me, too.'

'And me,' said Susan.

'And me,' said Neville.

'What?' said Bill angrily. 'No way. I already told you it's not going to happen--'

'Bill, Harry's right,' said Ron. 'We have to stop Voldemort now, tonight, or a lot of people are going to die.'

'I can't let you all go--' Bill started.

'Ron, I don't want you coming along--' Harry began

'If not us, then who?' said Hermione. 'Bill, we know it's dangerous, we...we understand the risk. And Harry, if you think we'd let you face this alone, you're absolutely stark raving mad.'

‘You said it yourself,’ said Ron. ‘There’s no time. We have to go tonight.’

‘Sue, please,’ said Harry weakly.

‘I’m going, too,’ said Susan, ‘so don’t go looking for sympathy from me.’

‘Neville, Ginny, you don’t have to--‘

‘Yes, we do, Harry,’ said Ginny.

‘That’s right,’ said Neville.

Harry and Bill looked at one another and groaned.

‘You lot aren’t going to let up, are you?’ said Harry.

‘Nope,’ said Ron, speaking for all of them.

‘Bill...’ Harry said slowly. ‘They are right. If we don’t do this tonight...’

‘Shit,’ said Bill, and he put his head in his hand and shook it. ‘Shit. This is insane. Absolutely bloody insane. The whole lot of us could be killed.’

‘We know,’ said Ron, and he tried not to think too hard about that.

‘I told Mum I’d look out for you,’ said Bill, looking at Ron and Ginny, then at Harry and Hermione. ‘Not lead you into Voldemort’s bloody HOUSE.’

‘Yeah, well, sometimes promises are meant to be broken,’ said Ginny, giving a shaky laugh.

‘Doing this involves the use of an unauthorized Portkey,’ said Bill. ‘If I don’t die tonight the Ministry will have my hide.’

‘If Harry gets Voldemort, unauthorized Portkeys won’t matter,’ said Ron.

‘And what if I decide not to make a bloody Portkey, how about that?’ said Bill, but he was weakening. Ron could tell by the way his older brother’s shoulders sagged a bit, by the thin tone in his voice.

‘We’ll just have to grab brooms or thestrals and go,’ said Harry.

Bill groaned again.

‘Fine,’ he said. ‘Fine. We’ll do it. I’ll make a bloody Portkey and we’ll go. But on one condition. I’m in charge. That means you do what I tell you, no ifs and or buts.’

‘Fine,’ said Harry, and the others nodded.

‘Furthermore, if we’re going to do this covertly, we can’t just show up at the doorstep,’ Bill went on. ‘We’ll have to arrive somewhere close by, where we can have some good cover.’

‘The graveyard,’ said Harry at once. ‘It’s old and it has a lot of overgrown trees and we can hide behind those or...or the headstones.’

‘Good,’ said Bill, and he took another deep breath. ‘But it’s not enough. Here’s what we do. The minute we land, we all do Disillusionment Charms. That’ll keep us basically invisible in the dark. We stick together unless I say so. We can get inside, we take out whatever Death Eaters we can with Stunners, find Luna and Eddie Carmichael, and get the hell out.’

‘But the book--’ said Hermione.

‘The book is useless without Luna,’ Bill said. ‘If we see it along the way, fine, grab it, but if not, leave it.’

Hermione nodded, and everyone seemed to agree upon this.

‘We have to get a message to Kingsley,’ said Bill, ‘and to Dad. Let them know what’s happening in case they can spare anyone. But I don’t want to spare anymore time going to my office to use the fireplace. And by now they must be getting inundated with Floo messages since they suspended getting owl post. They might not get ours quickly. Harry, how reliable is Hedwig?’

‘Very,’ said Harry at once. ‘I’ll fetch her.’

‘Better her than Pig,’ Ron muttered, as Harry hurried upstairs to the dormitory. He returned a few moments later with Hedwig on his arm, and parchment and quill and ink under the other arm.

‘Good,’ said Bill, taking the parchment, ink and quill. ‘The Ministry won’t be expecting owl post, which means they’ll pay more attention to it.’ He set the parchment on the table, dipped the quill into the ink, and scratched out a hasty message. He then rolled it up and sealed it with a tap of his wand. Harry held out his arm, and Hedwig--who was perched there--did the same with her right leg.

‘Ministry of Magic, Hedwig,’ said Bill, stroking her feathers for a moment. ‘And be quick.’

Hedwig gave a soft hoot; Harry carried her over to the window and opened it.

‘Be safe, girl,’ he said, and she took off in a rush of wings.

‘Right then,’ said Bill, rubbing his hands together. ‘I just need a good object for a Portkey...’

‘Here,’ said Harry; he turned, grabbed the large Quidditch Cup off the mantle, and placed it firmly on the coffee table. ‘Use that.’

Bill eyed Harry for a moment, then pulled out his wand. ‘Stand back, everyone,’ he said. He aimed the wand at the cup, and muttered ‘*Portus*.’

The cup glowed blue for a moment and vibrated against the table with a clang, but then it was silent and still again.

‘Gather round, everyone,’ said Bill, but by then Ron and everyone else was standing in a circle, all staring at the cup/Portkey.

Bill pointed his wand at the cup again, and muttered, ‘Cemetery, foot of the hill, Riddle House, Little Hangleton.’

He looked up at everyone. ‘Right,’ he said, ‘I want everyone to pair up. When you land, do a Disillusionment Charm on your partner.’ Ron immediately grabbed Hermione’s hand. Susan and Harry took hands; Ginny and Neville glanced at one another, shrugged, and held hands.

‘On three, grab the cup firmly, and don’t let go,’ said Bill. With his left hand, he reached for the cup; his right hand held up his wand. He glanced round one last time at everyone else, his eyes meeting Ron’s. Ron felt a thrill of fear, but he swallowed it, and nodded at Bill. He spoke one last time.

‘Merlin. Mum’s going to kill me,’ he said. ‘One, two...*three*.’

Ron reached for the cup and felt it at once: a jerking sensation, as though someone had put a hook behind his navel and pulled. He felt his feet leave the ground, and everything began to whirl and spin; sounds and colors blurred; it went on and on...

He landed with a lurch and the world stopped spinning as abruptly as it started.

He blinked several times, trying to steady himself, and looked around, relieved to see that his six companions were all there.

‘Wands out,’ Bill said quickly. ‘Do the charms now.’

Ron blinked once more, just in time to feel Hermione tap him sharply on the head with her wand and say ‘*Disillusion*.’ He felt the icy trickle of the charm as it worked on him; for a moment he was disorientated, but then his eyes cleared and he reached up--unable to really SEE his wand or his hand but for a thin outline that moved--and did the charm on Hermione. It worked. Harry and Susan quickly Disillusioned one another; Bill performed the charm on himself; Ginny worked it on Neville; Neville’s charm turned Ginny blue, and Bill fixed it.

Now, the seven of them were human chameleons. Invisible when still, but nearly so when moving, but for a thin silvery outline.

‘This is it,’ said Harry, from somewhere behind Ron.

They were in a small cemetery. It looked neatly kept but most of the headstones were very old. Ron heard Hermione gasp and turned to her, or where he thought she was. Somewhere close, anyway.

‘Look,’ she said, indicating three headstones. All of them bore the name Riddle. The one to the left looked a bit different; the earth in front of the monument was fresher, as though the grave had been disturbed once before. Ron shuddered.

'Ow!' said a voice. Harry.

'What's up, Harry?' said Bill, moving (Ron could see Bill's outline) toward Harry (whose outline was also visible; he was moving and clutching his scar).

'He's trying to get inside me,' said Harry. 'I...blocked him. It's okay. He doesn't know we're here.'

'Try and keep it that way,' said Bill firmly, gripping Harry's shoulder. 'Are you sure you're going to be okay?'

'Maybe...maybe we should go back,' said Susan nervously. 'Harry...'

'No,' said Harry, blinking and looking at her. 'It's okay. I can control it; he doesn't know we're here.'

Everyone looked at Harry for a moment--or where they thought he was standing-- and Bill nodded.

'All right, then,' Bill said. 'Is that the house, Harry?' Ron looked up the hill and saw it--a huge mansion at the top, old and falling apart, but so grand it was almost arrogant, almost glowering down at them.

'That's it,' said Harry.

'Let's move,' said Bill. 'I'm going first. Watch my outline, and follow me. Quietly. Stay close, move slowly and keep your eyes and ears open, got it?'

'Got it,' said a chorus of whispered voices.

'If we live through this,' said Bill, 'remind me to give you all a week's worth of detentions.'

Chapter Thirty-Two: Stealth and Capture

They started up the hill, with Ron bringing up the rear; it was a bizarre sight to his eyes: in the dark they were all difficult to see, looking like nothing but spectral silver outlines.

They crept up the hill, Ron's eyes were darting in all directions. Their pace was slow; there was no moon, it was incredibly dark, but Bill forbade the use of the lit wand tips. Several times one of them would stumble or step on a tree branch and crack it, and they would stop and drop to their knees, but after several minutes, they reached the back of a huge, dilapidated mansion. There was light inside; green, sickly light. They were in a massive, overgrown garden. Ron noticed that it was overflowing with flowers and blooms; somehow this struck him as perverse, grotesque, that such beautiful flowers would be growing behind the house of the most evil wizard who had ever lived.

Bill was scanning the windows of the house carefully, standing behind a tree. Ron crept up behind him; there were dark shapes moving back and forth from window to window. Dark, hooded shapes. Death Eaters. They looked like they were patrolling the corridors and rooms of the house, but there were only about a half dozen of them.

'Back here,' Bill whispered, 'behind this wall.' An outlined hand beckoned them behind the stone wall. They gathered around him, crouched down.

'Okay,' he whispered. 'I count six Death Eaters in the back; there's going to be more but let's concentrate on those for now. We Stun them, bind them, move them out of sight out quietly, and grab their robes and hoods.'

'Good idea,' said Ron, even as his heart raced with fear. We are all mad. We're about to go into a house with hundred death eaters and the most evil Dark Wizard of all time. We are all bloody mad.

'Now listen, all of you,' Bill was saying. 'No heroics, get me? Keep things as quiet as you can. First priority is finding Luna and Eddie and getting the hell out of there.'

Several silvery lines moved, and Ron took this to mean that everyone was nodding in agreement.

‘Let’s move,’ said Bill. ‘Slowly. Mind your steps, and don’t talk. I’m going out first. Harry, you next, then Ron, then Hermione, Susan, Ginny, and Neville, you bring up the rear. When I go, Harry, count to three, say “I’m going,” and then move. The rest of you, do the same. Now, I’m going.’ Ron peered over Harry’s shoulder to see the transparent outline of Bill creeping slowly behind the stone wall and toward the back door of the house.

‘One, two, three,’ Harry muttered. ‘I’m going.’ Harry’s shorter, skinnier outline was now moving up the garden path toward the back door.

‘One, two, three,’ Ron whispered. ‘I’m going.’ He crept up the same path Harry took, his eyes darting from the path ahead to the ground just in front of his feet.

A few minutes later all seven of them were at the back door. Three outlines--Ron couldn’t tell to whom they belonged--were to the right of the door. He, Bill, and the other two stood to the left of the door. Just then a Death Eater appeared. The seven of them froze, melting into their surroundings.

Ron’s eyes moved slowly to the Death Eater, who was peering out the window of the back door into the garden. He was hooded but unmasked; the man was tall, broad and had the kind of build that suggested extreme muscularity in youth but was just turning to fat in middle age. Ron recognized the mean, ugly features at once: it was Vincent Crabbe’s father.

The Death Eater Crabbe stood by the door for a moment, peering outside. He was standing in what looked like the kitchen. He gave a short grunt and moved to the left, through a swinging door and out of sight.

‘Hold it,’ Bill whispered to them. They waited another whole minute, then Ron saw the outline of a wand move to the doorknob and Bill’s voice whisper ‘*Alohomora.*’

The lock disengaged with a soft click, but the silence and darkness were so complete that the sound made them all, except Bill, jump just slightly.

Bill pulled open the door with agonizing slowness; it creaked and they froze again, waiting for another Death Eater to appear or for Crabbe to return, but nobody came.

‘Follow me, quietly,’ Bill whispered. Ron saw Bill’s outline slip inside; Harry was next--or at least it looked like Harry. Ron followed, and in a few moments everyone was crowded inside. Someone--Hermione, perhaps--slowly closed the door.

They froze again (Ron was amazed how they all did the same things at the same time without saying a word to each other) and waited for another Death Eater to appear. After another minute, none did.

‘All right,’ said Bill in a muffled voice. ‘We’ll cover more ground if we split up. Harry, you, Ron, Hermione and Susan go through that door and look around upstairs. Neville, Ginny and me will cover this level. Stay quiet, move slow. No arguments, no exceptions.’

Nobody said a word but Ron caught the outline of five other heads nodding.

“‘Mione,’ he whispered, suddenly needing to know where she was.

‘I’m right here,’ she said, and he suddenly felt her grip his hand. He looked down and saw nothing but the kitchen floor—it was odd, feeling her hand in his but not seeing it.

‘Let’s go,’ said Bill. ‘If you run into Death Eaters, take them out quietly. Don’t raise the alarm unless absolutely necessary, all right? Hopefully the Ministry will get our message soon and Kingsley will bring reinforcements.’

They all nodded again, and Ron heard Harry say, ‘Come on.’

Four pearly outlines of people moved off to the right, toward a closed door that led...somewhere. Ron turned to see three outlines moving to the left and through the swinging door.

Harry tried the knob, and it turned with a muffled click. He pushed the door open inch by inch. Ron didn’t like all this stealth stuff--the slow movement was torture on his muscles, which were tensed and ready to fight or fly.

They moved through the door and found themselves in a dining room. It was huge and grand and a massive chandelier hung from the high ceiling. In the center of the room was a long, long wooden table, surrounded by antique- looking, expensive dining chairs. Flush against the opposite wall was a huge china cabinet that was only partially full. To the left was a large double threshold leading into what was clearly a formal living room. They started toward it but then froze suddenly. Three Death Eaters were in there, two of them sitting on a long settee and another in a matching chair. Their backs were to them. They were unhooded and unmasked. Their sleeves were all rolled up, revealing the Dark Marks tattooed on their forearms. Ron had never seen these three before. They were smoking cigarettes, drinking some kind of amber liquid from glass tumblers and playing some sort of card game. A fire was crackling in the fireplace. The scene was both normal and entirely bizarre to Ron. He supposed he ought to have realized it, but he never suspected that Death Eaters did anything but kiss Voldemort’s shoes and fetch him things, go on patrol and plunder and pillage. These three men could have been--but for the black wizard robes and the marks on their forearms--Muggles sitting in a pub somewhere.

Harry’s outlined head turned to them and he whispered, ‘We’re taking them out.’ They nodded. Harry crept slowly along the path between the dining table and--Ron saw it for the first time--an enormous sideboard that was placed against the wall opposite the china cabinet. Its surface was bare but for an old tapestry runner.

Ron looked down and saw the thin outline of feet and the slight depressions made in the Oriental rug as they moved into the living room. The three Death Eaters didn’t turn, didn’t look up from their cards. They were laughing, joking, placing bets.

They moved closer. Ron’s heart was pounding so loudly in his ears that he was sure

any second the Death Eaters would all look up and realize he and the others were there. But they didn't look up. As Ron got closer to them he noticed they looked to be rather well into their cups, tipsy from whatever it was they were drinking.

'Pour me another, Rufus,' said one Death Eater, a slight, pale man with dark brown hair and gray eyes.

'Don't you think you've had enough?' said the second Death Eater, presumably the man called Rufus. He was slurring his words just a bit.

'Can't never have too much,' said the pale man. Rufus poured him some more of the drink from a huge crystal decanter--it looked like fire whisky to Ron. The pour was sloppy and some of the whisky sloshed onto the rug and onto the pale man's hand, but he didn't seem to care. He raised his glass and said 'Cheersh, mates,' and downed the whisky in one.

'Letsh play, dammit,' said the third Death Eater, a big, broad shouldered man Ron recognized at once as Crabbe. His words were slurring as well. 'Whosh turn ish it?'

'Mine,' said Rufus. He studied the cards on the table and the ones in his hand.

Harry crept forward, and Ron followed. He felt Hermione grip his hand again. They were getting very close to the Death Eaters now. It was just as well they were drunk and preoccupied. Taking them out shouldn't be too hard...

'Whatsh that?' said Crabbe suddenly, looking up and dropping his cards onto the floor.

'What?' said Rufus impatiently.

'Didn't you hear the floor creak?' said Crabbe irritably.

'I didn't hear nuffin', ' said Rufus. 'You're drunk, Crabbe. You're hearing fings.'

Crabbe paused for a moment and peered around the room. Ron was frozen and felt his heart race with fear. He didn't even blink, so afraid was he that the slightest hint of movement would give them away to the Death Eaters. Crabbe looked around again--his eyes darting rather drunkenly--and then he turned back to the game.

'You're right, Rufush,' he slurred. 'Thish here fire-whishkey's shtrong shtuff.'

'The shtronger the better, eh?' said the pale, slight man, laughing out loud.

'Shut it, Nott!' said Rufus. 'You want the boss to catch us again?'

'Right,' said Nott, trying to look very serious all of a sudden and only succeeding in looking drunker.

Their attentions turned back to their game. Harry moved sideways, slowly coming behind the couch. Ron saw him motion with his wand at them; he felt, rather than saw, Susan move carefully behind Crabbe's chair. Ron felt Hermione let go of his hand as

Ron moved next to Harry.

Ron saw the outline of Harry's wand pointed at the pale man called Nott; the tip was almost touching him between the shoulder blades. Ron raised his own wand behind Rufus. He saw Hermione and Susan both raise their wands at Crabbe--Crabbe was so big it might take two spells to take him out.

Harry held up his left outlined hand and Ron, Susan and Hermione could make out the gestures of 'one, two--' And then Harry's outline gave a sharp nod of his head.

As one, the four of them hissed '*STUPEFY!*' Jets of light shot from their wand tips and hit the three Death Eaters point blank. The three of them slumped over in their seats, stunned.

In the next second Ron let out a horrified gasp. Nott had been holding the bottle of fire whisky, and now the bottle was plummeting toward the floor, where it would shatter...

'*Wingardium Leviosa!*' Susan hissed, catching the bottle with her Levitation Charm and floating it back to the table, where it landed with a very soft clink.

'Good one,' Harry whispered. 'Maybe we should stow these idiots out of the way.'

They moved faster now, but still carefully enough to keep quiet. They stripped off the Death Eater's robes, picked up their abandoned hoods from the coffee table, then used the Incarcerous Charm to bind the three Death Eaters with invisible ropes and gags. Hermione spotted a large armoire. She performed an Shrinking Spell on the Death Eaters so that they could fit inside, and the four of them levitated the stunned Death Eaters to the inside of the armoire, stuffing them unceremoniously within the cabinet.

'I can't believe you can do a Shrinking Spell on people,' Ron whispered, impressed.

'Shh,' Hermione whispered. She then sealed the door shut with a flick of her wand as she muttered '*Colloportus.*'

'Good work,' said Harry softly. 'Hermione, Susan, Ron, put those on. We can grab another robe on our way upstairs.' The three of them quickly put on robes, but then had to change when it became clear that Ron's robe--which had belonged to Nott--was far too small for him. Ron wound up with Crabbe's robe; Hermione with Rufus's, and Susan--the smallest in their group--with Nott's. They pulled on the masks and put up the hoods. The effect was unnerving, to say the least. Ron really didn't like dressing up as a Death Eater. He pulled the hood low over his head; if anyone had seen his face up close behind the mask all they'd see were dark empty spaces where eyes should be. Better not to give other Death Eaters that opportunity. Hermione and Susan followed his lead and pulled their own hoods low over their foreheads.

They exited the living room, Ron leading the way this time, with Harry at the back. They immediately were met with a fourth Death Eater.

‘So, taking your patrolling seriously at last, are ye Crabbe?’ said a voice with a thick Scottish brogue. Ron recognized him as ‘. Ron cleared his throat and gave a low grunt.

‘Yeah,’ he said, hoping he sounded convincingly like Crabbe.

‘Good,’ said ‘, clapping Ron on the back so hard his hood nearly slipped. Ron shot a hand up and caught it just in time.

‘Relax, Crabbe,’ said ‘ jovially. ‘I know who ye are, ye don’t have to keep yer hood up in the house.’

‘I like to,’ Ron grunted.

‘Ye sound funny,’ said ‘, suddenly looking suspicious. ‘Ye have a cold?’

‘A bit, yeah,’ said Ron, his heart racing so fast he thought it might explode inside his chest. Just then he felt movement next to him; Harry.

‘What the--’ ‘ obviously saw something, and he backed away and reached inside his robes for his wand. Harry was way ahead of him. Ron saw the outline of a wand tip lift up and point directly at ‘s chest, and Harry hissed, ‘*Stupefy!*’ ‘ slumped to the floor.

‘Hurry!’ Harry urged. Getting ‘ tied up and out of the way was a more nerve-racking process now that they were in a hallway; another Death Eater could spot what they were doing at any second.

They stuffed ‘ unceremoniously in a closet beneath the stairs. Ron heard Harry give a soft, ironic sort of chuckle as Hermione shut the closet door and sealed it. Then Harry pulled on ‘s robes and mask.

‘Let’s undo the Disillusionment Charm, yeah?’ Harry suggested. ‘Be easier to deal with our wands and see each other.’

They did; Ron felt Hermione tap him on the head and utter the incantation, and warmth seeped into his blood. He did the same for Hermione, and was rather relieved to see her brown eyes appear behind the hood.

‘Okay, now we can move a bit faster,’ he whispered. ‘Let’s get upstairs.’

They hurried up the stairs as quietly as they could. At the top was a landing that veered off down a long corridor. There were several doors along each wall.

‘Let’s check the doors, then,’ Harry whispered. The four of them--none of them seemed to want to split up, even if it might have made checking behind the many doors go faster--shuffled up to the first door on the left. Ron put an ear to it.

‘I don’t hear anything,’ he said softly.

‘Should--should we open it?’ Susan asked.

‘Yeah,’ said Harry. ‘But nice and slow.’

Harry gripped the handle of the door to find it unlocked. Very slowly he turned the knob. Ron held his breath. Voldemort could be behind this very door...

The door opened and they found themselves staring into a dimly lit but utterly empty room.

‘Move on,’ said Harry, quickly shutting the door.

They continued down the hall, checking doors as they went; the first four revealed nothing but empty rooms lit by nothing more than a few flickering candles. Ron began to feel very uneasy. Luna *had* to be behind one of these doors. But then so was Voldemort, unless he was downstairs. In which case he might have discovered Bill, Neville and Ginny.

They advanced to the fifth door. Ron tried the knob and found it locked. He aimed his wand--still visible only as a thin outline--at the door and whispered ‘*Alohomora*.’ The knob turned with a click.

‘Slow,’ Harry murmured.

Ron pushed the door open--he held his breath, and his hand was gripping his wand so tightly he was sure his knuckles, had they been visible, would be white.

‘Bloody hell,’ he whispered, at the sight that greeted them.

Bodies. Half a dozen, perhaps. All very, very dead. They were lined up along the bare wooden floor, and they were oozing...something. Flies buzzed about in the room. The smell nearly knocked Ron over.

Hermione gasped. ‘Look! They’re wearing lab coats.’

‘I don’t wanna look,’ Ron muttered, trying to not vomit from the smell. He made a gagging noise in his throat and covered his mouth.

‘It’s those scientists,’ she whispered. ‘He...he killed them all.’

‘We can’t help them now,’ Harry hissed, ‘let’s go before Ron pukes.’

Ron shot Harry a dirty look. The others moved past him and Ron pulled the door shut as quickly and as quietly as he could.

They came to the next door. It, too, was locked. Harry volunteered to open it (‘in case we see any more bodies; Ron might hurl’).

‘Bite me, Harry,’ Ron whispered.

‘Ron!’ Hermione hissed.

‘Quiet!’ Harry snapped, in a whisper, and he performed the unlocking charm and gently pushed the door open.

‘Look!’ said Hermione. The room was huge and had dozens of large bookshelves. Ron blinked and it came to him. The room in his dream, where he’d seen Luna. This room was like a maze, though--with a lot more bookshelves than he’d remembered in the dream.

‘Do you reckon--’ Harry mused.

‘Yeah,’ said Ron at once, and he pushed his way inside and made for a bookshelf.

The others followed suit and chose separate bookshelves; Hermione shut the door

behind them. Their eyes raced over the titles on the spines; those books whose spines had faded were pulled from the shelves and opened.

‘What are we looking for?’ Harry whispered.

‘Leather,’ said Ron. ‘Thick, old...’

‘That describes every bloody book here, Ron,’ Harry said.

‘It whispers,’ said Ron.

‘What do you mean it whispers?’

‘I dunno,’ Ron said, curious as to why he said that. He saw Harry shrug.

They began to search, moving quietly but as fast as they could under the circumstances. Ron scanned the shelves frantically, looking for the book. And then he heard it.

Fata Morgana...

‘Listen!’ he hissed.

Everyone froze for a moment.

‘What?’ Harry said.

‘Don’t you hear that?’ said Ron.

‘Hear what?’ said Hermione, sounding exasperated.

Fata Morgana....

‘Fata Morgana,’ said Ron. He began to move about the room, trying to find the source of the whispering. As he moved to the left, it got louder.

‘Fata Morgana is Morgan’s Latin name, Ron,’ said Hermione, and he could almost hear her rolling her eyes. ‘What are you doing?’

He wasn’t paying attention to her, or anyone else. He moved further to the left and went behind the farthest bookshelf; the whispers were so loud in his ears they were like shouting. He hesitated.

‘Don’t you HEAR it?’ Ron hissed again. He looked at the other three robed figures and they all shook their heads and shrugged. Why couldn’t they hear it? And suddenly Ron knew what Harry must have felt like, in second year, when he was hearing the basilisk where nobody else could. What did it mean, then, that Ron could hear whispers that no one else could hear?

Fata Morgana...

He moved round to the back of the farthest bookshelf and came to an abrupt halt. His eyes widened. Flush with the wall was a large console table, and on top of the table was a large leather book.

Fata Morgana...apertum, apertum...

‘Ron?’

He barely heard Hermione’s voice; he felt his feet moving toward the book. The whispers got louder, until they become so overlapped that it was one long, continuous, white-noise drone.

‘Ron!’ Hermione hissed again.

‘Found it,’ he heard himself say, and he was there, at the table, stretching out his hand over the book.

Apertum...apertum...

He put his hand on the book; it was vibrating and warm to the touch. He had to open it...

‘Ron, don’t open it!’ Hermione hissed, and she grabbed his wrist and jerked his hand away. ‘You don’t know what it will do.’

‘I dreamed about this,’ said Ron, and he felt strange. Vague. Distant. The whispering buzzed in his head. ‘I have to open it, Hermione...’

‘You can’t--’

‘Shh!’ Harry hissed. ‘Listen!’

Ron looked up, momentarily snapping out of his daze. Did that mean that Harry could hear the whispers, too?

‘What?’ Susan whispered, but then they heard it. A moan. Soft, low. Pained.

Ron dragged his eyes from the book and looked past the console table to see a closet door.

‘In there,’ said Harry, who came up beside Ron. Ron blinked and shook his head. His brain felt fogged.

‘Wands up,’ Harry said. ‘I’m going to open the door.’

He tried the knob; the door was locked. He used the Unlocking Charm and the knob clicked.

‘Ready,’ he whispered. Ron watched, his eyes feeling a bit heavy, his jaw feeling slack. The whispers were softer now, droning in his head. He realized he ought to raise his wand, just in case.

Harry slowly opened the door, then leapt backward. They found themselves looking in a small closet. A small, crumpled figure was lying on the floor.

Luna.

‘Luna,’ Hermione breathed. Ron came back to himself slightly when he saw Luna. She was a mess; her clothes were torn and bloody; she was shivering and the sleeves of her school blouse were in tatters, revealing contusions up and down her arms. She had mean gashes on both cheeks, and across her forehead, all of them caked with dried blood. Her hair was tangled and hung in limp, greasy ropes. She was missing a shoe, and her legs, too, were badly bruised.

‘My god,’ said Harry. ‘Luna.’

She looked up and tears came to her eyes. Harry moved toward her to help her up.

‘Ron, help me,’ Harry hissed, and Ron blinked again and felt himself moving toward Luna.

She looked up at both of them.

‘Can you stand?’ Harry asked. ‘We’ve got to get you out of here’

‘Don’t...know...’ she choked. ‘Hurts.’

Harry looked at Ron. ‘I think they used Crucio on her, the bastards.’

Ron swallowed. The whispers had receded in his mind as he focused on the bruised, battered girl huddled on the floor in the closet. But his mind still felt...thick, somehow.

‘Let’s get you up, Luna,’ said Ron, and he bent down low and put an arm round her. She whimpered from the contact, but let Ron gently lift her up.

‘I’ve got her,’ said Harry, putting an arm round Luna’s waist. ‘Hang onto me, Luna. Ron, you bring up the rear.’

Ron stared at Luna for a moment, and nodded. His brain was addled, and he didn’t understand why, but nobody else seemed to notice.

‘Let’s go,’ Harry whispered.

‘Eddie,’ Luna moaned.

‘What about him?’ said Harry. ‘Do you know where Eddie is?’

‘Eddie...’ Luna repeated. ‘Hurt...a trap...they set it...’

‘I know,’ said Harry, nodding. ‘But we have to get you out of here. Do you know where Eddie is?’

Luna shook her head, and her face lit up with fear.

‘It’s okay, it’s okay,’ said Harry quickly. ‘We’ll find him. But we have to get out of here.’

Ron watched as Harry slowly started to lead Luna away, with Hermione and Susan following. At that moment, the whispers began again...

Fata Morgana...apertum...

‘Ron, bring the book,’ Hermione called behind her. But Ron wasn’t looking at Hermione. He was staring at the book.

‘Got it,’ he said, and he stretched out his hand toward the book and placed his hand on it.

Apertum...

Ron’s hand gripped the cover.

‘The book...’ Luna gasped. Her voice sounded far away.

‘It’s okay, Luna, we’re bringing it,’ said Hermione.

‘No...’ she wheezed. ‘The book...Ron...don’t...open it...’

Hermione gave a gasp. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her turn (at least he thought it was her). Then Harry and Luna and Susan were turning. Ron gently pulled open the book...

‘No!’ Hermione hissed.

The flash of light was blinding; the whispers rose up like a scream and pierced Ron’s skull. He stumbled and fell, landing hard on the floor on his tailbone. The pain of the landing was nothing compared to the pain of the sound in his head. The whispers were gone, and there was only high, shrieking laughter. Laughter that set a chill in his bones.

‘Ron, are you okay?’ Hermione whispered. Ron blinked and looked up. Hermione was there; he could not see her face for the Death Eater hood, but it was her voice, her scent.

Ron shook his head. ‘Fine,’ he said.

‘What the hell were you doing, Ron?’ Harry hissed. ‘Get the book and let’s get the hell out of there.’

Luna gave a kind of low moan, and Ron looked up at her.

‘You shouldn’t have done that, Ronald,’ she said sadly.

Ron's blood went cold. 'Why not?'

'It's okay,' said Harry. 'Everyone's fine. Let's get out of here.'

'Ron, get up,' said Hermione sharply, and he pulled himself off the floor. 'What were you thinking?' she added, shaking her head. 'We could have been caught!' She closed the book sharply and picked it up, tucking it under her arm.

'Sorry,' said Ron, feeling more and more ridiculous as his head cleared. And more and more scared. His dream. He remembered it all now, because he'd practically lived it just then. What did it mean?

'It's okay,' said Harry. 'Voldemort doesn't know we're hear. I'm paying attention to that.'

'Come on,' said Susan.

'Luna, are you okay to walk?' said Harry. 'Luna?'

But Luna sagged in Harry's arms. She had passed out.

'I've got her,' said Ron.

Harry looked up; Ron couldn't see his eyes, but he was sure there was doubt in them, and Ron didn't blame him. He himself didn't know what he was thinking, going into that weird trance and opening the book when it was obviously so dangerous.

'You sure?' said Harry.

‘Yeah,’ said Ron. ‘I can carry her. I’m stronger than you but you’re quicker with spells.’

‘Right,’ said Harry, and Ron could almost feel his best mate smirk at him. Ron scooped up Luna in his arms; she seemed to weigh almost nothing, and he felt the protrusion of her bones. As he arranged her carefully, he at last saw her palms: each bore a horrible, long gash that had crusted over heavily with blood.

‘Let’s go!’ Hermione hissed. ‘We’ve spent too much time here already.’

Harry moved back to the closed door that led out into the corridor; he pressed his ear against it, then motioned the rest of them forward.

Ron brought up the rear, holding Luna close. If they ran into any Death Eaters it would take some doing to explain why supposedly some of their own rank were carrying Voldemort’s prisoner around.

Very carefully, Harry eased the door open, and stuck his head out the door, looking in both directions down the hall. He then gestured with his free hand to come out, and everyone moved slowly and carefully out of the room. Ron held his wand up awkwardly, but Luna was small enough that he could at least make some use of his wand hand, if it came to that. Which he sincerely hoped it did not. His mind fully alert now, he wanted desperately to get out of there. The hell with Eddie, he thought. He’s probably in league with Voldemort, anyway.

They moved back down the corridor, toward the stairs, when they heard another sound. More soft moaning, this coming from a door to their right.

Harry turned and shrugged.

‘We have to check,’ whispered Hermione.

Harry hesitated, then nodded. Ron watched him; he was moving carefully but he wasn't clutching his scar at all.

And suddenly, it hit Ron. Harry hadn't reached up to touch his scar since they'd been inside the house. Far from being comforting to Ron, it was unnerving. Surely Harry would have felt something by now. If Voldemort were here, somewhere in the house, Harry would have felt him, wouldn't he?

Ron felt his heart begin to race. This was too easy. All of it. He'd opened the book, and Luna had told him he shouldn't have done that. Why? He thought back to his dream, as Harry approached the right hand door where the moans were coming from.

The dream, Ron thought. What else was in the dream. Dobby. Dobby was punishing himself, banging his head on the shelf. But that didn't seem to mean anything, really. Did it? Luna. There was something about Luna, in the dream. She'd said almost the exact same thing to him in the dream as she'd said just now, but it was different. She was different.

She wasn't beat up in the dream, he thought. No, that's not it.

But Ron couldn't dwell on the meaning of his dream any further, because Harry was pushing open the door and motioning them to come in. Ron followed quickly, grateful that Luna was small and light, but still feeling his arms start to grow a bit tired.

They entered a candle-lit room which had a massive bed in the center of the room. The moans were louder now, and they were coming from the far side of the bed.

They hurried over and found Eddie Carmichael lying on his side on the floor. He was as battered as Luna.

'Eddie!' Harry hissed.

Eddie's blue-grey eyes flickered open and he looked up.

‘Who is it?’ he whispered.

‘Harry,’ said Harry. ‘Harry Potter. I’m here with some friends. We’re going to get you out. Can you stand?’

‘My god,’ said Eddie, and he managed to sit up. ‘You...you came for us? Luna and me?’

‘Yeah,’ said Harry, and he extended a hand and helped Eddie up. ‘But we have to get out of here now. Can you walk?’

‘I can walk,’ said Eddie, nodding. He blinked a few times, then shook his head. ‘I’m okay. I’m just a bit weak. They haven’t fed us anything. How is...Luna!’

‘Shh!’ Hermione snapped, but Eddie hurried over to Ron.

‘She’s alive,’ said Ron shortly, holding Luna more tightly. ‘I’ve got her.’

‘They tortured her,’ said Eddie, shaking his head, as he brushed a strand of hair from Luna’s eyes. ‘They used the Imperius Curse on her, they forced her...’

‘We know,’ said Harry. ‘That’s why we have to go now. If we get out now Luna won’t be around to finish making that poison. Come on.’

‘Okay,’ said Eddie.

Harry once again took up the lead, with Susan and Hermione behind him. Eddie moved behind Hermione, hobbling and limping, and Ron brought up the rear once

more, and they crept out of the room and back into the corridor, which was, thank Merlin, still empty.

They started toward the stairs, and Ron heard a soft sigh. He looked down and saw Luna stir slightly.

‘It’s okay,’ he whispered, and they started down the stairs.

Luna moaned softly in Ron’s arms, once, twice. Her eyes were fluttering. They were nearly home free. Ron just hoped that Ginny, Neville and Bill had already left.

‘We’re almost there,’ Harry hissed. He turned from the staircase to take the route through the living room back to the kitchen. So close.

And then everything happened at once.

At that moment, Luna’s eyes opened, and she gave a loud gasp.

‘Eddie...’ she choked. She became to tremble violently.

Eddie whirled around, his movements suddenly easy and light. His dark eyes flashed as he stared at Luna.

Then Ron heard Harry wince, and saw his arm fly up to his forehead.

‘Harry--’ said Hermione, her voice tight with fear.

Ron, however, was staring at Eddie, who had shifted his gaze to Ron. The Head Boy’s black eyes glittered like cold onyx.

Black eyes.

Ron felt his stomach drop. Eddie's eyes were supposed to be blue-grey, not black. And then Eddie smiled and began to laugh, and it was the laugh Ron had heard in his dreams. Eddie.

'He knows--' Harry began, clutching at his forehead under the Death Eater hood.

'Get the hell out of here now!' Ron yelled. 'Run!'

They started to run away as Eddie laughed and laughed, but in the next moment the whole house came alive with the sounds of loud cracking. Everywhere around them, Death Eaters were Apparating into the room.

More of them appeared behind Eddie. All of them unmasked and smiling at them, holding their wands at them. Standing at the fore was the tall, sleek-haired figure of Lucius Mafloy.

'What's this?' he said wryly, rubbing his chin. 'Some of our brethren taking the lovely Miss Lovegood out for a nighttime frolic in the cemetery?'

He raised his wand and shouted '*Divestio!*' In the next instant the hoods, robes and masks covering Ron, Harry, Hermione and Susan fluttered away, as though dissolving from them.

Eddie laughed maniacally, and Ron closed his eyes against the sound. His laugh was that of the sinister, dark-haired witch in the dreams. Was she here, too? She and Eddie had the same eyes. But that was impossible. Eddie Carmichael had blue-grey eyes. They couldn't just change to black...

'Well, well, well, Potter,' Lucius Malfoy sneered. 'Doesn't this look familiar? You have a new friend thrown in the mix, I see'--he indicated Susan--'but how nice of you to drop by.'

Ron, Harry, Hermione and Susan raised their wands, and Malfoy chuckled.

Come, come,' he said, 'do you really think you can take on twenty of us, when you're dragging around that sad sack of a girl and you have such a *nasty* headache? I think I'll take those, however, just to be safe.'

He raised his own wand and shouted, '*Expelliarmus!*' and four wands flew threw the air, to land neatly in the arms of a Death Eater just behind him.

Eddie was still laughing, and Ron whirled on him.

'Carmichael,' Ron spat, his arm around Luna's waist as she clung to him weakly. 'You bloody bastard.' Eddie smiled back at him triumphantly.

'How nice to see you again, Mr. Weasley,' Lucius Malfoy said through an evil smile. 'Loyal sidekick that you are. When are you going to learn that riding on Potter's coattails is not good for your continued good health?'

'Better Harry's coattails than Voldemort's,' Ron growled.

The Death Eaters all hissed at the sound of Voldemort's name. A vein in Malfoy's jaw twitched, but otherwise his face remained impassive.

'And I see the know-it-all Mudblood is here as well,' Malfoy went on, nodding to Hermione. 'Let me guess. You figured it all out. Clever girl. It's a shame such brains and talents are wasted on one so unclean.'

'Talk to Voldemort about being unclean,' Harry snapped, clutching his scar but rising to his feet, holding his wand tightly. 'Or didn't you know your boss is a half-blood?'

The Death Eaters hissed again, and Lucius Malfoy pointed his wand at Harry's chest.

'Do not speak of things which you know nothing about,' Malfoy said slowly.

'It's true!' Harry shouted, clutching his scar and screwing his face up against the pain. 'Oh, did he forget to mention it?'

'Shut up!' Malfoy snapped, his veneer of calm momentarily broken. He raised his wand. 'You will learn quickly enough to hold your tongue. *Crucio!*'

A jet of light shot from Malfoy's wand and struck Harry in the chest. He screamed and collapsed to the floor, writhing in pain.

'NO!' Ron, Hermione and Susan screamed at once. Susan crashed to the floor beside Harry and reached for him just as Malfoy lifted the curse. Harry lay in a ball on his side, moaning in pain. Susan pulled him up and held him to her; he sank limply against her body. Tears were on her cheeks.

'How sweet,' Malfoy jeered, glowering at Susan, who stared up at him with undisguised loathing. 'Is this your girlfriend, Potter? But...wait. I think I know who you are, my dear. Susan...Bones, is it? I'm well acquainted with your family. Terrible, isn't it, to have lost so many relatives? Tell me, how IS your dear aunt?'

'SHUT UP!' Susan yelled. Harry clutched her like a lifeline and tried to pull himself up.

'Oh dear,' said Malfoy, shaking his head. 'Youth today. So disrespectful of their elders.'

'Go to hell, Malfoy,' Harry grunted. In the next instant he grabbed at his scar, sinking against Susan, who was barely holding him up now.

'Oh, I don't think so, Potter,' said Malfoy. 'No, I think hell is waiting just upstairs, for you and your friends. Including the other three who so foolishly came with you tonight.'

Chapter Thirty-Three: The Dark Lord

'Let's go up, shall we?' said Malfoy, in a malevolent, honeyed voice. 'Bring them up!' he added to the Death Eaters.

At once Ron felt strong hands grip his arms and shoulders. Luna was pulled out of his arms and flung carelessly over the shoulder of a Death Eater: Crabbe. She moaned in pain and mumbled something incomprehensible.

'Gently!' Malfoy hissed. 'We need her healthy. Or at least, mostly healthy.'

'Leave her alone!' Ron yelled, as a second Death Eater grabbed his left arm and started to drag him toward the stairs.

'Shut up,' said the first Death Eater, cuffing Ron upside the head so hard that tears formed in his eyes.

'Don't!' Hermione cried, as yet another Death Eater pushed her up the stairs.

'Quiet!' Malfoy snapped.

‘Let them go,’ Harry croaked, struggling against a Death Eater who had him in a near-choke hold. ‘He doesn’t need them. I’m the one he wants.’

‘How noble of you, Potter,’ said Malfoy dryly. ‘But I’m afraid the Dark Lord’s plans for you also include plans for your friends. No, I’m afraid they will simply have to stay.’

They reached the top of the stairs and were met by more Death Eaters--these were still hooded and masked--who were holding a struggling Bill, Ginny and Neville. They looked, at least thus far, to be unhurt.

‘Ron!’ Bill yelled, and the Death Eater next to him slapped him in the face.

‘Shut it!’ he roared.

‘Get them inside,’ Malfoy ordered. The Death Eaters holding Bill, Ginny and Neville yanked them around and pushed them down the hall.

Ron struggled but it was useless--the two Death Eaters were massive and strong, and any time Ron resisted one of them smacked him on the back of the head so hard it caused stars to appear in front of his eyes. He quickly gave up on struggling and tried going limp, but this only earned him a very hard kick in the backside.

‘MOVE!’ the Death Eater on his left snapped.

They reached the end of the corridor. There was a large door on the left wall. Malfoy, having paraded to the front of the crowd, turned and said ‘Silence!’

The Death Eaters fell quiet. Ron was tempted to start yelling but a swift look from both Hermione and Bill changed his mind.

Malfoy opened the door and beckoned the Death Eaters inside. Ron’s captors shoved him through the door.

The room was huge, so huge that it had to have been magically enlarged. It was nearly empty of furniture, but for a gigantic, ornate bed in the far left corner of the room, a large desk along the opposite wall, and a single chair that sat facing a massive fireplace in the center of the room. The flames in the fireplace were the only light in the room. The chair was facing the fire and on either side was a large copper cauldron, both of them steaming and bubbling, with magic blue flames beneath.

Ron was shoved to the middle of the room, along with Harry, Hermione, Ginny, Bill, Susan and Neville. Luna, however, was carried to the far right corner of the room and set on her feet, where she stood weakly against Crabbe. Ron reached for Hermione and pulled her close. She was trembling with fear. Susan and Harry were clinging to each other, Harry clutching at his scar and trying not to moan out loud with the pain. Neville and Ginny were huddled close to Bill.

A figure was sitting in the chair, a very tall figure with almost no hair on the pasty, white scalp. A long, skeletally thin right hand was visible, and it was stroking the scaly head of a huge, sinister snake that was coiled next to the chair. The snake rocked back and forth, its forked tongue flickering in and out of its mouth.

Ron instantly felt his blood turn to ice. It wasn't the same kind of cold he felt in the presence of Dementors. It was a thousand times worse. A voice spoke, a thin, reedy, cold voice. It came from the figure seated in the chair.

'Malfoy,' the voice said.

'My Lord,' Malfoy answered, in a voice resonant with supplication. Malfoy approached the chair and knelt down on its left side, his eyes downcast.

'You have brought all of them?' the cold voice asked, as the hand continued to stroke the head of the snake.

'Yes, my Lord,' said Malfoy. 'Potter--'

'I KNOW you have Potter, fool,' the voice snapped. 'I can sense his presence. His friends?'

'All of them, my Lord,' said Malfoy meekly.

'Good,' said the voice, sounding pleased. 'Excellent. You shall be rewarded, Malfoy.'

'Thank you, my Lord,' Malfoy said, bowing low on his knees. Ron felt mingled horror and disgust at the spectacle.

'Your son,' said the voice, 'has done well. You should be pleased with him.'

Ron felt sick. What the hell did THAT mean?

'I am, my Lord,' said Malfoy.

'But he has one more test,' said the voice. 'One more test tonight, and he will be one of us. He is ready?'

'Yes, my Lord,' droned Malfoy, his eyes fixed on the floor.

'Bring him in,' said the voice coldly. Malfoy bowed so low now his forehead nearly touched the floor, then he rose gracefully and swept across the room to the left, where there was a door that, Ron realized, connected this room to the one next door.

Lucius Malfoy opened the door and said, 'Come, Draco.'

Ron and Hermione gripped each other even tighter as Draco Malfoy, wearing Death Eater robes, strode into the room. He shot Ron and Harry a triumphant look, and then took a place behind his father, who had returned to the left of the chair and knelt down again.

‘Malfoy,’ Ron growled. ‘You bloody--’

‘SILENCE!’ The voice from behind the chair was so loud and piercing Ron jumped. Hermione gave Ron’s hands a squeeze and looked at him imploringly, willing him to say nothing else. Ron didn’t need the encouragement to shut up.

‘We are all assembled, then?’ the voice went on, as though nothing untoward had just happened.

‘Yes, my Lord,’ said Lucius Malfoy.

‘Excellent,’ said the voice. ‘Go, Nagini.’ The snake next to the chair suddenly gave a hiss and uncoiled its long length and began to slither along the floor in a menacing circle around Ron and the others. Harry stared at the snake in horror--was this the same snake that had attacked Ron’s father last year? Harry opened his mouth to speak.

‘Nagini will obey no one but me,’ said the voice softly. ‘Parseltongue is useless on her.’

Harry looked up and stared at the chair, his hand still pressed against his scar. He looked white, feverish, but also murderously angry.

‘Once again,’ the voice went on, ‘we meet. How many times have you escaped me, Potter? Five? Six? I have lost count. Impressive. Not even your parents escaped me that often. But tonight, I think, the odds favor me.’

‘Let them go,’ Harry said fiercely, staring daggers at the back of the chair.

‘YOU ARE IN NO POSITION TO MAKE DEMANDS, POTTER!’ the voice yelled furiously. ‘You, arrogant boy, you have been a pebble in my shoe, a nuisance to me from the day I set eyes upon you. Taking your life tonight will not be enough to satisfy me, to give me back the years that you stole from me, the headaches you have caused me. No, your friends will stay here. They will know the full wrath of Lord Voldemort. You will all bear witness to the beginning of the end of the pitiful world you have tried to create and protect. And you will all die with the knowledge that you could not stop me.’

The voice stopped speaking and the figure in the chair stood slowly. Ron swallowed. The figure in the chair was tall and emaciated but radiated overwhelming, malevolent strength. Very slowly, the figure turned.

Ron wasn’t aware of breathing in that moment. All he knew was that what he saw in front of him was so horrible, so frightening, that it couldn’t be real. Hermione gasped in his arms and clung to him tighter.

The figure was that of a man, except that it was too terrible to be a human man. The man’s face was barely a face. Eyes that were crimson red, with cat- eye slits for pupils. A nose that was little more than two gashes, forming grotesque nostrils; a mouth that seemed to have no lips. Skin so pasty white and stretched so tight that it looked like it

might tear. Hands with fingers so long and sharp they almost resembled bone-white knife blades.

This was Lord Voldemort.

‘Ah,’ he said, smiling a lipless smile. ‘The “gang” is all here. What loyal friends you have, Potter. All of them willing to follow you to their deaths. I must admit, I envy you. Well, perhaps not the part where you will die, of course, but certainly the loyalty of your friends. Would that all of my Death Eaters have always shown such loyalty to me.’

At this Voldemort scanned the room and the Death Eaters, as if being pushed a giant, invisible hand, all bowed to Voldemort. He smiled again; Ron could not remember seeing anything as ugly as that smile.

‘Separate them,’ Voldemort said, with a wave of his hand, and Ron felt Hermione yanked away from him; Susan and Harry were pulled apart; Bill, Ginny and Neville, too, were separated. All seven of them stood inches from one another, gripped by Death Eaters who pointed wands at their throats. Ron tried to reach for Hermione’s hand, but was rewarded with a punch to the back of his shoulder that was so hard it made him gasp in pain.

‘Keep still!’ the Death Eater barked. ‘Or I’ll make you keep still, and it’ll hurt.’

Voldemort chuckled, and backed up slightly.

‘Now, I can get a proper look at all of you,’ he said, and with that he began to pace; his stride was so smooth and light it was as if he were floating just a few inches above the floor.

‘Let me see,’ he said, and he stopped in front of Hermione. She looked up at him, her eyes defiant, but her chin trembled, just slightly.

‘This must be the Mudblood,’ he said. ‘Tell me, have your parents recovered from their little...visit with my Death Eaters?’

Hermione bit her lip; she was fighting tears. Ron wanted to reach for her again but resisted the impulse; the Death Eater holding her might hurt her in retaliation.

‘Let me guess,’ Voldemort went on, and he moved closer to Hermione; she recoiled and tried to back away but only succeeding in bumping into the Death Eater gripping her from behind. ‘You figured it all out, didn’t you? My plan.’

‘Yes,’ Hermione said, her voice shaking but full of hatred.

‘I thought so,’ said Voldemort, smiling his thin smile. ‘You’re a very clever girl. A shame such a fine mind is wasted on a Mudblood.’

Hermione said nothing; she merely bit her lip again, as Voldemort moved past her and came to stand in front of Ron. Ron was absurdly pleased to see that he was taller than Voldemort.

‘And here we have one of Arthur Weasley’s brats,’ said Voldemort. ‘What is your name, boy? There are so many of you it’s difficult to keep all of you straight.’

Ron said nothing, and the Death Eater behind him shifted and landed a swift punch in Ron’s side. He gasped with the pain of it and nearly bent over.

‘You will answer me when I ask you a question, boy,’ Voldemort hissed.

‘Ron,’ he choked. ‘Ron.’

‘Ah, Potter’s sidekick,’ said Voldemort. ‘Well, I think it’s safe to say you are not the brains of this little outfit, or you might have been wiser in your choice of friends.’

Ron started to retort, but the Death Eater punched him again in the side, and he was made speechless. Hermione whimpered, and their eyes met. They were going to die tonight. It was just a question of how long it would take, and how painful it would be.

Voldemort moved on, passing Harry, and stopping in front of Susan.

‘So this is Potter’s little girlfriend,’ he said, his voice sleek and sounding very pleased. ‘I’m well acquainted with your family, of course, Miss Bones. Tragic about all those relatives of yours.’

‘Leave her alone,’ Harry growled. Of all of them, he seemed to be the only one who wasn’t half-frozen in fear.

‘I’ve already told you, Potter,’ said Voldemort, turning to him and eyeing him with controlled fury. ‘You are in no position to make demands, and unless you are keen to witness my Death Eaters have some fun with little Miss Bones, I strongly suggest you shut up.’

Harry glowered at Voldemort but said nothing else; Voldemort moved on past Susan, who was crying silently, and came to Bill.

‘Another Weasley,’ he said. ‘The oldest son and the only fully qualified wizard. You’ve been helping Potter with his Occlumency and Legilimency. What were you thinking, allowing Potter and his friends to come here tonight? Because of you, your poor dear mother will lose three of her beloved children.’

Bill swallowed, and Ron saw fear in his oldest brother’s eyes for the first time since they’d come here. Fear, and regret, and guilt. Before Bill could say a word, Voldemort had stopped in front of Neville.

‘Ah, yes, Longbottom,’ he said, smiling. ‘How are your parents? Bellatrix sends her good wishes. She’s thought of little but you since your last...*rendez-vous*.’

Neville whimpered and looked at the floor. Voldemort chuckled as he glided past him and came to a stop, finally, in front of Ginny.

‘Well, well, what have we here?’ he said, in a voice that sent a chill down Ron’s spine. ‘Can it be... Virginia Weasley, all grown up?’

Voldemort moved closer to Ginny. Her face was streaked with tears, but she looked up at him without flinching, with absolute hatred.

‘Have you missed me, Ginny?’ Voldemort asked, and he ran a thin, bony finger across her jaw.

‘Don’t touch her!’ Ron snapped, and his Death Eater cuffed him once more, very hard, on the head. Voldemort, however, ignored Ron altogether; Ron shook his head to clear it as Voldemort moved even closer to Ginny. Ginny didn’t back away, but met his eyes.

Voldemort pulled a wand from his robes; Ron and Bill both started to yell and were cuffed, hard. But instead of hexing Ginny, Voldemort muttered something unintelligible, and pointed his wand at himself. There was a flash, and in the next instant, Voldemort was gone.

In his place stood a boy, no older than sixteen or seventeen. Tall but not overly so, with waving black hair and brown eyes, and smooth, unblemished skin. He might have been handsome, but for the emptiness, the coldness of his eyes.

‘Have you missed your Tom, Ginny?’ the boy said. At this, Ginny whimpered.

‘Go away,’ she whispered.

‘I’ve missed you. I’ve missed our little talks,’ he hissed, smiling.

Ginny's defiance was melting and she trembled and cried silently.

'Do you still dream about me, Ginny?' Tom/Voldemort asked. 'Potter can't be the only one, can he? You and I...we had something special, did we not?'

He was very close to her now, and Ginny shrank into herself.

'No,' she whispered.

'You told me everything, spilled out your very soul to me,' he said, in a voice that was almost seductive. It turned Ron's blood to ice.

And in return, I gave you something, didn't I?' Tom/Voldemort went on. 'My friendship. My trust. My love.'

'Leave her alone,' Harry snapped, and he earned a swift punch in the stomach. But Voldemort didn't even notice this; Ron watched in horror as this monster, disguised as the boy Ginny had known long ago, taunted her.

'You were quite a useful servant,' he went on, and he brushed her cheek with his palm. She turned her face away, but he caught her chin and pulled her face back to his. He was inches from her now; it was almost as if he was about to kiss her.

'Leave me alone,' she begged. He smiled and his fingers trailed gently down her throat; it was a lover's caress. Ron felt sick.

'Do you want to come back to me?' he said. 'Sweet Ginny. You've become a lovely young woman. We can have so much more fun together now--'

‘You sick bastard!’ Ron bit out, because he couldn’t stand it anymore. He had never really known what Voldemort had done to Ginny when he’d possessed her, because Ginny had never told him. And Ron hadn’t wanted to know. Ginny had spent a month in St. Mungo’s psychiatric treatment to deal with it, and whoever had treated her was the keeper of those secrets.

But now...now...there was white rage inside him. At himself, for never having asked her what Voldemort had done to her, for not being there enough for her. And at Voldemort...

What had Voldemort done to his little sister? What had this sick, twisted psychopath done to Ginny?

Voldemort’s head snapped up at Ron’s outburst, and Ginny flinched and jerked away as he changed from his Tom form into his present self; his dark eyes became the red slits; his hands became white and sharp, his nostrils became reptilian slits.

‘I warned you to keep quiet,’ said Voldemort, in a low voice. He pointed his wand right at Ron’s chest and said the word so quietly, Ron almost didn’t hear it.

‘Crucio.’

Ron vaguely heard Ginny, Harry and Hermione all scream ‘NO!’ at the same time before the spell hit him. The pain was incredible, beyond anything he could have possibly imagined. Every muscle and bone and tendon in his body was on fire and pulled taut. He heard someone screaming, furious, blood-curdling, throat-shredding screams, and they were coming from him, and he was falling to the floor and writhing, writhing, trying to get the pain off him, to make it stop.

Suddenly, the curse lifted, and the pain of that was nearly as bad as the curse itself. Ron was panting and sweating and he heard Hermione and Ginny and Susan all sobbing. He opened his eyes and saw spots, and he heard Voldemort’s voice, distant and cold.

‘Get him up,’ he said, and Ron felt rough hands yank him from the floor and force him to stand. He tried to, but his legs nearly gave out on him as the pain receded by the electric charge of the curse continued to pull at his muscles.

The Death Eater wouldn’t let him fall, though, and Ron, by sheer force of will, made his legs remain underneath him.

‘That hurt, didn’t it?’ said Voldemort, and Ron looked up. The Dark Lord was once again in the center of the room. ‘I imagine we won’t hear anymore interruptions from you.’

Ron shook his head, and he looked at Hermione, who had a wild, desperate kind of fear on her face. Ron swallowed. Merlin, if we’re all going to die, at least let me hold onto Hermione when it happens.

‘So, Potter,’ said Voldemort, and his voice was grotesquely conversational, as though he and Harry were discussing the latest Quidditch rankings, ‘you thought, of course, that by coming tonight that you’d have plenty of time to get Miss Lovegood away before she could complete the potion, didn’t you?’

Harry said nothing.

‘You cannot hide your mind from me, Potter,’ said Voldemort, his tone cold again. ‘I know your thoughts. Yes, you thought by sneaking in here and grabbing Miss Lovegood and getting her out of here, book or no, that you’d bring my brilliant scheme to a grinding halt.’

He paused.

‘Really, Potter,’ he said. ‘When are you going to learn not to underestimate me?’

Ron glanced over at Harry, who swallowed.

‘Did you really think,’ Voldemort went on, ‘that I would allow you even the slightest chance to interfere with my plans? No, dear boy. That is your problem. You never learn.’

‘You see, Potter, I already have a batch of the Draught of Death all prepared and ready to...disperse. So in the end, you and your friends came here for nothing. Even if you had escaped this house, your efforts would have been useless.’

‘You bastard,’ Harry growled, but his voice shook. ‘It’s me you want. It’s always been me. Why did you lead us all here if you already had your poison? Why not just bring me here and kill me and leave them out of it?’

‘Where is the satisfaction in that?’ said Voldemort, smiling. ‘I told you, boy, that your death will not be enough to satisfy me. No. You will watch your friends die. All of them. Slowly and painfully. And when the last one of them--your girlfriend, I think--is dead, you will beg me to kill you, and I’ll still let you live. I’ll put you through such torment you’ll think the Cruciatus Curse is nothing but a faint tickle. And you’ll beg me to kill you again, and I won’t. I’ll keep you alive for as long as your pain and suffering entertain me, and only then will I do you the mercy of ending your life.’

Harry stared back at Voldemort in horror, and Ron saw the other boy’s shoulders sag, just slightly.

‘Don’t do that,’ he said, his voice entirely pleading. ‘Torture me all you want, just...just please don’t hurt them...’

‘Oh, how sweet,’ Voldemort sneered. ‘Potter the Martyr. Unfortunately your pleas fall on deaf ears. But don’t fret. I won’t kill your friends right away. I want to show you first the fruits of my labors. The way I will end the old world, and create the new.’

He moved to the two cauldrons that were bubbling gently over their magic blue fires. Ron’s strength, which had been sapped from the Cruciatus Curse, was coming back. But even his renewed strength gave him no hope. They were outnumbered and had no wands. They were going to die.

‘What is interesting,’ said Voldemort, ‘is that it was young Mr. Weasley here, who apparently determined which deadly disease I decided to use. The Black Death. It does have a ring to it, doesn’t it? And of course using this particular sickness is a kind of poetic justice. Avenging the torture and persecution of wizard-kind with the very disease the Muggles blamed us, wrongly, for creating.’

Voldemort chuckled. ‘Of course, finding reliable sources of *Yersenia pestis* required a bit of creativity on my part, but the Muggle scientists proved frightfully helpful in that regard. It turns out that *Yersenia pestis* is quite commonly produced in laboratories, and I was able to get a rather generous supply. The scientists worked very hard making it for me. Of course, I couldn’t very well keep them here to do it--far too dangerous. No, I placed them under the Imperius Curse and had them make it in their labs and bring it to me. It worked quite well for a while but then the Muggle authorities began to get suspicious and laboratories started tightening their security. But by then I had plenty of *Yersenia pestis* to play with. Sadly, the scientists were no longer useful to me. I suppose I could have modified their memories but I tried that once with Bertha Jorkins and well, in the end, I think I did those scientists a favor by killing them instead. I’ve never been very good at Memory Charms.’

He chuckled again, and some Death Eaters, including Draco Malfoy, laughed sycophantically. Ron shot a murderous look in Draco’s direction, but the other boy was too busy glowering and sneering triumphantly at Harry. Meanwhile, Nagini continued her slow circling and hissing. Ron resisted the urge to kick at her; if this was the snake that had attacked his father, she’d probably get in a strike or two before he had a chance to react, and he’d wind up poisoned.

‘And the book?’ said Harry. ‘You used Eddie to get the book.’

‘Ah, yes,’ said Voldemort, tenting his hands together. ‘Mr. Carmichael. That was not my idea, actually, at all. But Mr. Carmichael convinced me that he could not only very effectively infiltrate the school, but that he could quite easily ingratiate himself well enough to whoever the descendant of Queen Morgan happened to be. And it turns out that this was the case. Yes, Mr. Carmichael’s involvement was inspired.

‘Of course, not everyone was keen on Eddie,’ Voldemort went on. ‘Mr. Weasley, the youngest, for one. For someone possessing such otherwise uninspiring intellect, I must say, Mr. Weasley, you are rather an excellent judge of character.

‘Once I knew that Potter’s closest friend was suspicious, I was tempted to remove Mr. Carmichael altogether, but thank heavens, he convinced me otherwise.’

‘Weasley’s suspicions worked to our advantage, it turns out. When Mr. Carmichael turned his favors toward Miss Granger, I’d say Weasley became intimately involved with trying to counter my plans. All to the better, for now Weasley is here as well, and Potter will only suffer more.’

‘Go to hell,’ Harry snarled.

Voldemort chuckled again. ‘Dear boy, you have spirit. It will be a joy to see you broken.’

At this, the Death Eaters all hissed appreciatively. Ron struggled again, and his Death Eater kicked him hard in the calf, nearly sending him tumbling again.

‘But, back to Mr. Carmichael,’ Voldemort went on, either not noticing or not caring about Ron at all. ‘He came to me with several likely names, candidates who might be the descendant, and of course my Death Eaters were quick to act. I suspected the book was in Hogwarts all along, but I had to be sure. Carmichael was quite sure the descendant was Luna, but he had no proof. Only suspicions. It was only when young Mr. Malfoy, who was also acting on my behalf, got a look at Luna’s birth chart and confirmed those suspicions that I decided it was time to act. The Quidditch match was the perfect opportunity.’

‘Eddie’s been working for you all along,’ said Harry. ‘All this time--’

‘Your suspicions of Mr. Carmichael only begin to scratch the surface, Potter,’ said Voldemort. ‘Eddie is not at all what he seems.’

‘No kidding,’ said Harry sarcastically. ‘Tell us something we don’t know.’

The Death Eaters hissed again, but Voldemort merely smiled.

‘Do you really think Dumbledore would have allowed just anyone to be Head Boy, Potter?’ he asked. ‘After what happened at the end of last year? You clearly haven’t learned enough about wizarding families. The Carmichael family is among the oldest in Britain--purebloods who have long been supporters of Dumbledore’s cause. Dumbledore trusts the Carmichaels; he knows their son well. He also has been extremely wary of who to trust ever since my most faithful follower, Barty Crouch, Jr., infiltrated your school while posing as your teacher. Barty’s plan was brilliant and very nearly worked, but Dumbledore would be on the lookout for another such attempt to use Polyjuice Potion. And in any case, it’s a challenge, kidnapping someone and keeping them captive for months at a time.’

Ron stared at Voldemort, partly in horror but also in confusion. What was he talking about? Then Ron looked at Eddie, who smiled coldly back at him, his black eyes glittering.

And suddenly...suddenly everything fell into place in Ron’s mind with a dull thud. Those black eyes, the eyes in his dreams. They weren’t Eddie’s eyes. Because Eddie...wasn’t Eddie at all. And if it wasn’t Polyjuice that caused the change in...whoever this person’s eyes...there was only one explanation...

‘You,’ Ron breathed, his eyes fixed on the false Eddie. ‘You’re a...a Metamorphmagus, aren’t you?’

Everyone gasped and looked at Ron.

‘Ron, you--’ Hermione began.

‘Well, well,’ said Voldemort, sounding mildly impressed. ‘I suppose the sidekick isn’t quite as dimwitted as I thought.’

‘Close, Weasley,’ the false Eddie said, in that eerie, shrill voice. ‘Very close. But not quite.’

‘What are you, then?’ Ron spat.

It was Hermione who spoke. 'He's a shape-shifter.'

'Very good, Mudblood,' the false Eddie sneered. 'Surely you've heard of our kind, Weasley. No doubt Granger's filled you in. Morgan Le Fey was one.'

'But...but I've...I've never heard of...there's no record of a male shapeshifter,' said Hermione, shaking her head in disbelief. 'Not for centuries...'

'There wouldn't be a record of me,' said Eddie, smiling darkly. 'I've never been one to comply with silly Ministry laws. Being an unregistered shape-shifter has its advantages. And no, I'm sadly not related to the Queen of the Fairies, else I wouldn't have had to spend nine months of my time flirting with silly little schoolgirls and convincing them to tell me their deepest, darkest secrets. But of course, my work was for a higher cause.'

'If you're not Eddie,' said Harry slowly, looking at the false Eddie with a newly horrified expression on his face, 'then who are you?'

'Can't you guess, Potter?' the false Eddie said slowly, his voice rising still higher. 'Or perhaps I should ask Mr. Longbottom. He might know who I am. We met last year, right around this time.'

'Oh my god,' Harry said, for the first time sounding genuinely terrified. Neville gave a kind of strangled moan.

Eddie began to laugh. A horrible, wild sort of laugh that sounded like it came from a banshee. But then something else happened.

He began to change. His eyes, already black as coal, became more hooded, the lashes thicker. His hair, normally sandy brown, was turning black, and it was growing, growing out of his head and down his back in a thick black sheet. His skin grew paler and completely hairless, but wrinkles formed around the eyes and mouth. Ron felt his jaw drop.

Where before there had been the handsome, arrogant face of a youth, there was now the ravaged, evil, slightly deranged but still beautiful face of a woman.

Ron almost fainted at the sight. He'd seen this in his dreams. Eddie, changing into this sinister, evil Dark Witch.

'Bellatrix Lestrange,' Harry choked. Ron looked over to see Harry white with rage. And then Ron remembered. This was the woman who had killed Sirius Black. Ron looked at Neville, and saw on his face, too, hatred so deep it seemed to come from Neville's very pores. Bellatrix had tortured Neville's parents until they had lost their minds. And Ron suddenly hated this woman--who had spent an entire year posing as a student--more than anything. Even more than Voldemort.

‘What did you do with the real Eddie Carmichael?’ Harry snapped, gritting his teeth. But Ron and the others already knew the answer.

‘I killed him, naturally,’ said Bellatrix matter-of-factly, as though she were discussing the weather. ‘There was really no other choice. I suppose it might have helped to have him around to write letters to his parents--they still don’t know he’s dead, poor things--but then I realized how difficult it would be to keep Eddie contained and quiet. It simply would have been too much of a headache. I didn’t need the excess baggage, you see.’

Ron felt sick. This woman had killed a boy and to her he was nothing more than baggage.

‘You’re...you’re sick,’ Neville croaked, his own fists clenched so hard his knuckles were white. ‘You’re mad.’

‘Oh, no, Longbottom,’ said Bellatrix, leering at him through her hooded black eyes. ‘That description best fits your parents.’

‘That will do, Bella,’ said Voldemort, a hint of edge in his voice. ‘You’ll have plenty of time to have fun later. I’m afraid I simply can’t share Potter with you, of course, but surely Longbottom will be a fine enough plaything.’

‘Of course, my Lord,’ Bellatrix said submissively, bowing to him and then looking up at him with supplicant, adoring eyes.

‘Of course, Bella had help on the inside,’ Voldemort said smugly. ‘Draco Malfoy was a wonderful fount of information. But I cannot leave out the other help I received inside the school. Of course, the help was not always reliable, but then I do appreciate the difficult situation he is in, having pretended to have deserted me in order to be welcomed back into Dumbledore’s loving fold. It is never easy, being a spy, but I daresay Severus has made it an art form.’

‘What?’ Harry snapped.

‘Oh, Severus, of course,’ said Voldemort, ignoring Harry. ‘I think it’s time these young people knew about their favorite teacher, don’t you. Please, don’t be shy. Say hello to Harry Potter and his friends.’

To a one, the seven of them gasped as Professor Snape stepped forward, removing his Death Eater hood. His hooked nose and black eyes looked grotesque in the sickly firelight.

‘I knew it,’ said Harry in fury. ‘I knew you were a traitor!’

‘Shut up, Potter,’ Snape said in a bored voice.

‘Dumbledore trusted you!’ Hermione yelled, looking positively affronted that she had, in fact, been wrong about Snape. Ron could hardly feel good, however, that he had

always been right.

‘Dumbledore trusts a lot of people he shouldn’t,’ said Snape coolly.

‘Yes,’ said Voldemort, his tone of voice suggesting that Snape’s part in the conversation was over. Snape immediately understood, bowed, and faded back into the crowd of Death Eaters. ‘Dumbledore has always been a bit of a fool about such things.

‘But let us not leave out one last important player in our little game,’ said Voldemort. ‘Wormtail, come and receive your due, won’t you?’

Ron felt his stomach clench again as the short, squat man he’d seen in Hogsmeade crept his way through the line of Death Eaters and bowed before Voldemort.

‘My lord,’ he said, in his high-pitched, wheezy voice.

‘Wormtail, I’m afraid these young people were under the impression that you would be doing me the service of spreading my little gift to the Muggle world,’ said Voldemort. ‘In this they were somewhat mistaken. There are much easier ways to infect Muggles with disease. I found that out from my lovely scientists, may they rest in peace. Wormtail will help, of course--he has, shall we say, a rather thorough knowledge of the sewer network in this country, and he can easily help spread my sickness among the vermin. But before I can do that I must make sure he is immune to the effects of *Nectaris Mortiferum*. The Draught of Life, *Nectaris Vitale*, in this cauldron here’--Voldemort indicated the cauldron to the right of the chair--‘will serve as his protection. But in the meantime I think sending a little of my illness into the water and food supplies will be sufficient to...what’s the phrase...”get the ball rolling.” That said, I can hardly let loose my lovely little poison without testing it properly.’

‘What do you mean?’ said Harry sharply. He reached for Susan’s hand, and it was slapped away, hard, by the Death Eater holding onto him.

‘Well, you didn’t really expect me to test my little concoction on one of my own people, did you?’ Voldemort asked. ‘What a waste of manpower that would be. No, I think one of you will do quite nicely as a test subject for the Draught of Death. And since this little elixir is meant to purge the world of filthy Muggles, it seems only fitting to test the formula on the Mudblood, doesn’t it?’

Chapter Thirty-Four: Betrayals

‘NO!’

The word was out of Ron’s mouth before he even thought of it. He reached for Hermione but the Death Eaters were quicker. Two of them advanced on Ron, grabbing him around the arms. A third Death Eater snatched Hermione by the hair and yanked her forward; she squealed in pain. ‘Ron!’

‘Hermione!’ One of the Death Eaters holding Ron punched him, hard, in the stomach. Ron felt bile rise in his throat and stars appeared in front of his eyes; he choked and coughed and sank to his knees.

‘How very touching,’ said Voldemort, smiling with his lipless mouth. ‘Young love. I imagine if Mr. Weasley were able to talk, he’d beg us to test the formula on him instead of Miss Granger. Am I right, Mr. Weasley?’

‘Ron, don’t!’ Hermione cried, squirming even as the Death Eater holding her tightened his grip on her hair.

Ron forced himself to look up at Voldemort. He tried to speak but the wind had been knocked from him by the Death Eater’s punch, so he nodded vigorously.

‘Please...’ he managed.

‘Alas, Mr. Weasley, I’m afraid I am disinclined to acquiesce to your most eloquent request,’ said Voldemort sarcastically. Bellatrix Lestrange and the other Death Eaters laughed sycophantically. ‘But don’t worry. You’ll be joining Miss Granger in the afterlife soon enough.’

‘No,’ Ron mumbled feebly.

‘Get up,’ said the Death Eater who had punched him, and he and his compatriot yanked Ron up so hard by his arms that Ron felt one of his shoulders nearly dislocate. He howled in pain and Hermione let out a strangled sob.

‘Gently, Augustus,’ said Voldemort, shaking his head slightly. ‘We don’t want to do too much damage. Yet.’

Voldemort turned his attention to Hermione, who had stopped struggling and was staring hopelessly at Ron, tears pouring down her face.

‘Now then, let’s get this over with, shall we?’ said Voldemort pleasantly. ‘Lucius, bring your son.’

Lucius Malfoy bowed low, stood up sharply and said briskly, ‘Draco. Come forward.’

Draco Malfoy stepped out of the line of Death Eaters. Ron could find nothing to be satisfied about the fact that Draco appeared nervous, even scared.

‘Kneel, boy,’ said Voldemort imperiously, and Draco obeyed at once. ‘You have shown yourself to be a valuable asset to me. But now I have one last task for you.’

‘Yes, my Lord,’ said Draco, his voice cracking just a bit.

‘Rise,’ said Voldemort, and Draco obeyed. ‘Macnair, your knife, if you please.’

MacNair handed Voldemort the knife, handle-side out. Voldemort took it and held it out to Draco.

‘Bella, the flask of potion,’ said Voldemort. Bellatrix pulled from her robes a flask and took from the fireplace mantle a pair of tongs. She put the flask into the grip of the tongs, dipped the flask into the left cauldron and lifted it out very carefully. She then wrapped the flask in an old rag she picked up from the mantle, and set down the tongs.

‘Bring it here,’ instructed Voldemort, and Bella carried the flask to him. The liquid inside bubbled sick and dark red; black specks in it were moving about.

Luna, who up to now had been silent, gave a low moan.

‘This is the culmination of the greatest Dark Magic ever created,’ said Voldemort, taking the cloth-wrapped flask and holding it away from his face, admiring it like some huge jewel. ‘Morgan Le Fey created this magic from her own blood. With *Yersenia pestis*, the source for the Black Death, and the blood of her descendant, we will destroy all who oppose us.’

The Death Eaters murmured amongst themselves in agreement, bowing to Voldemort and nodding at Luna, whom Crabbe had dragged forward and was holding up by one arm. She whimpered, crying silently, and looked at Ron, at Harry, at Hermione, at all of them. She was mouthing words that to Ron looked like ‘I’m sorry.’

Voldemort ignored Luna and turned to Draco, who was holding the knife in one hand. Voldemort snapped his fingers and Bella came to his side and took the flask back, holding it very carefully.

‘You will take this knife,’ said Voldemort slowly to Draco. ‘Cut the Mudblood’s flesh. Then take the flask and pour the Draught onto the wound. A few drops will do.’

‘No!’ Ron yelled. ‘Malfoy, don’t!’

‘Shut up!’ bellowed the Death Eater to Ron’s right, and he backhanded Ron hard across the jaw. Ron’s head exploded into a million tiny stars and he felt a molar loosen.

‘Malfoy, please don’t do this!’ Harry begged, still clutching Susan. Ginny was sobbing; Bill, silent all this time, clutched her close to him and had a hand on Neville’s shoulder; Neville was staring at Luna miserably.

‘Ignore them, Draco,’ said Lucius Malfoy sternly, through gritted teeth.

‘Y-Yes, sir,’ said Draco, nodding to his father.

‘Do it, boy,’ said Voldemort, sneering his lipless mouth.

‘Yes, my Lord,’ said Draco, his voice rather squeaky. He bowed low to Voldemort and turned slowly to Hermione, who immediately began to squirm. The Death Eater holding her yanked on her hair again; she squeaked and went still.

‘Malfoy, NO!’ Ron begged, struggling uselessly against the two Death Eaters, who were now gripping his arms so tight they had gone numb.

‘I cannot THINK for all this shouting!’ Voldemort roared, and he pulled his wand from his robes, pointed it at Ron’s throat and said, ‘*Silencio!*’ Ron immediately felt his voice disappear.

‘Hermione!’ he cried, but no sound came out. She was looking at him, tears still pouring from her eyes. Ron felt his heart rise up into his throat and suddenly, tears were in his eyes, falling down his cheeks.

There was nothing he could do. These evil, evil people were going to kill Hermione, and there wasn’t a damn thing he could do to stop them. They were going to kill his girl, his Hermione, his best friend, the only girl he’d ever loved in his life, and he could only stand there and watch her die.

Draco Malfoy reached Hermione; Bellatrix at his side. Malfoy was a foot away from Hermione, whose gaze left Ron’s and fell on Draco, but instead of looking at him with pleading eyes, her expression was hateful, defiant. Draco, meanwhile, stared at Hermione in shock and fury. His mouth curled into a hateful sneer, and he reached out and grabbed Hermione’s wrist, giving her arm a wrenching twist. She squeaked in pain as Draco exposed the soft flesh on the underside of her forearm.

Draco’s eyes met Hermione’s again, and this time, the defiance was mingled with a kind of dignified resignation. Ron felt himself begin to almost choke on his tears. Even in the face of death she was brave, unflinching. He wanted to yell to her that he was sorry, that he loved her, but his voice was silent, and she wasn’t looking at him now.

Draco raised the knife and held it above the pale skin of her arm, his eyes never leaving Hermione’s face. A moment passed and it was an eternity. Draco’s hand was shaking.

‘Do it, Draco,’ Lucius Malfoy hissed.

Draco held the knife over Hermione’s arm. His eyes moved from her face to the knife, back and forth. Ron stared, waiting for Draco to slash Hermione’s skin with the blade, waiting for the inevitable spurt of blood that would come from the wound, but it didn’t come.

Draco swallowed hard and lowered the knife. His hand was trembling violently.

‘Do it, boy!’ Voldemort ordered, sounding suddenly furious.

Draco nodded feverishly, his eyes on Hermione’s face. The flash of hatred he’d shown her was gone. Now there was only fear in his gray eyes.

‘DO IT!’ Voldemort screamed.

Draco nodded again and lifted the knife. Any second now, he would strike. Any second...

The knife glittered as it clattered noisily to the floor. Draco was panting, sweating, and in all his life Ron had never seen the other boy look so scared. Draco backed away, shaking his head.

‘I...I can’t,’ he whispered.

For a moment there was silence. A silence so complete it seemed, ironically, to be as loud as a million fireworks exploding at once.

But in the next instant the real explosion happened.

‘FOOL!’ Voldemort screamed. He whirled on Lucius Malfoy, who looked alternately terrified and disgusted with Draco. ‘This is what you mean when you say your son is ready to be one of us?’

‘Forgive me, my Lord,’ Lucius said, his voice pleading; he crashed to his knees and bowed, entirely submissive. ‘The boy...I thought he was ready!’

‘This is his mother’s influence!’ Voldemort cried. ‘I asked you to remove her!’

‘I did, my lord!’ Lucius said quickly. ‘Exactly as you asked me!’

‘I always knew your wife would ruin your son,’ Voldemort hissed.

‘Don’t you talk about my mother!’ Draco snapped. Ron and the others stared at him; Draco Malfoy, mouthing off to his father’s master?

Voldemort whirled on Draco. ‘You dare raise your voice to me, stripling?’

‘My lord--’ Lucius began.

‘Silence, Lucius!’ Voldemort snapped. ‘Your son lacks proper respect. You should have sent him to Durmstrang as I instructed, but you allowed your wife to hold sway. And she has done nothing but coddle this boy, and he is pathetic! Had I known the reach of her influence I would have ordered you to kill her years ago!’

The silence that came in the wake of this outburst was as loud as a thunderclap. For another eternity, nobody said a word. And then Ron heard a kind of strangled, choked cry come from Draco.

‘Father,’ he croaked. ‘What is he saying?’

‘Be quiet, Draco!’ Lucius hissed, still on his knees.

‘What is he saying?’ Draco yelled. ‘What does he mean about Mother? Tell me!’

‘Your Father showed me the depth and breadth of his loyalty, boy,’ Voldemort. ‘Your mother was useful from time to time, but in the end she spoiled you far too much. A pity her death comes too late to save you.’

‘NO!’ Draco screamed, and suddenly he was crying, sobbing, and the sight of it horrified Ron. The blond boy’s sobs echoed through the room as he turned on his father. ‘You bastard! You lied to me! You said she went on holiday! You bloody bastard! How could you--how could you--your own wife!’

‘Shut up, boy!’ Voldemort shrieked. ‘Now, Lucius, you will see how Lord Voldemort punishes those who disappoint him.’

He gave Lucius Malfoy a swift kick in the side before whirling around to face Draco. Draco seemed to shrink before Ron’s very eyes. Voldemort lifted his wand.

‘CRUCIO!’

A jet of light shot from the wand and struck Draco in the chest. He screamed and crashed to the floor, writhing in agony.

‘F-Father!’ he cried, sobbing. ‘H-Help me! Please!’

Lucius had climbed up from the floor to look down in his side. Ron was horrified by the expression on the senior Malfoy’s face. Where there should have been compassion, where there should have been love, there burned only disgust and resentment. Malfoy was allowing his master to torture his own son. He’d killed his wife, Draco’s mother. All the years Ron had hated Draco; all the years of insults, taunts, malice that he’d thrown at Ron and his family. But watching Draco writhe on the floor, with his father glaring down at him, gave rise to an entirely unfamiliar and uncomfortable feeling in Ron: pity. Pity for this wretched boy who, in the end, was losing everything.

The curse lifted and Draco still bawled; the huge snake, Nagini, slithered hopefully over to him, hissing, but Voldemort lifted a hand, calling the snake off, and it resumed its circles around Ron and the others.

‘Get him up,’ Voldemort snapped at Lucius. Lucius strode gracefully over to the crumpled form of his son and grabbed his arm, yanking him up brutally from the floor. Draco gave a yelp of pain and continued to sob.

‘Your son is worthless to me,’ said Voldemort viciously.

‘Forgive me, Master, my Lord,’ said Lucius, bowing low even as he gripped Draco’s arm like a vise.

‘He clearly does not have loyalty in his heart,’ said Voldemort, glowering at Draco, who was clutching his stomach.

‘He can learn it,’ said Lucius quickly. ‘Allow me to train him personally, my Lord. His mother is no longer around to corrupt him.’

‘No,’ said Voldemort. ‘Loyalty is born, not made, Lucius. You have proven yourself a worthy servant, but the boy’s blood is your blood. You will prove your loyalty to Lord Voldemort once again.’

Lucius Malfoy glanced at Draco, then back at Voldemort.

‘Name what you wish, my Lord,’ said Lucius,

‘Put your son in Nagini’s circle, with the others,’ said Voldemort. ‘He will die with the rest of them.’

Lucius swallowed and glanced again at Draco. Draco’s eyes had gone as wide as Ron had ever seen them.

‘B-but my Lord, h-he is my only son, my heir,’ said Lucius haltingly.

‘You can produce another heir, can you not?’ Voldemort snapped. ‘And hopefully this time you will choose a more loyal and worthy broodmare.’

Lucius swallowed again, his throat working. He looked at his son, then at Harry and the others. Again, there was the loud silence. Lucius looked back at Voldemort, and without another look at Draco, Lucius shoved his son back, where Draco collided with Harry.

‘Father, no!’

‘Silence, boy!’ said Voldemort. ‘A wise decision, Lucius. You see, boy. Your father understands the true meaning of loyalty. A pity you won’t grow up to follow his example, but I’m sure your mother will be delighted to see you in the afterlife.’

Lucius looked over at his son, his face a frozen mask, only his eyes giving away his own abject terror.

Draco, on the other hand, exploded at his father.

‘I hate you!’ he shouted. ‘You killed Mother! You sick...FREAK! I’ve done everything you asked me to do! You filthy son of a bitch! You think he won’t kill YOU the minute you stop being useful to him? I hate you! Mother was right about you! You’re a bloody coward!’

‘Silence, Draco!’ Lucius snapped, his eyes darting from his son to Voldemort and back again.

‘I-I’m your SON!’ Draco cried, tears starting again. ‘I’m your son!’

‘QUIET!’ Voldemort screamed, pointing his wand at Draco’s throat and uttering ‘*Silencio*.’ Draco’s voice vanished, but his mouth was still moving; he was shouting at his father silently.

Voldemort seemed to have recovered his temper almost at once. ‘Teenagers. So loud and unruly and unrefined. I’ll be glad to get rid of the lot of you. Now, let us finish what was started with this Mudblood.’

Ron looked up sharply. ‘No,’ he wheezed. His voice was starting to come back, and he struggled against his Death Eater captors.

‘Allow me, my lord,’ said a heavily accented voice. Another Death Eater approached, and Ron recognized him as Antonin Dolohov, the same Death Eater who had cast the wicked spell on Hermione that had nearly killed her. His stomach plummeted.

‘As you wish, Antonin,’ said Voldemort smugly, clearly certain of Dolohov’s fortitude for killing.

‘No,’ Ron hissed, struggling again. ‘Please, don’t...’

But his pleas were useless, and only served to inspire his captors to yank at his wrenched shoulder; he screamed, but it was nothing more than a whimper.

Dolohov strode toward Hermione. He ignored the knife on the ground. Without preamble or hesitation he grabbed her wrist and twisted it to again expose the flesh on the underside of her forearm. He smiled at her malevolently, raised his wand and pointed it at her flesh, gave the wand a harsh slash and said, ‘*Diffindo.*’

Hermione gasped as her skin split open.

‘No!’ Ron yelled weakly, receiving another punch in the gut. Blood poured from Hermione’s wound; Dolohov had cut her deeply.

‘Give me the flask, Bellatrix,’ he ordered, sliding his wand back into his robes. He still clutched Hermione’s hand, still smiled down at her as tears ran down her face.

‘No!’ Ron croaked again, coughing. ‘Don’t!’ Not Hermione, he thought wildly, struggling feebly against his captors. Cut me, poison me, just leave her alone!

Dolohov took the flask, still wrapped in the rag, and held it up for a moment. Hermione struggled but the Death Eater behind her grabbed her hair yet again and pulled; several strands broke from her scalp.

‘Keep her still!’ Dolohov snapped.

‘Don’t,’ she whispered weakly.

‘Don’t worry, my dear,’ said Voldemort, in a grotesquely kind sort of voice. ‘It won’t hurt that much.’

‘Stop!’ Ron begged, but Dolohov tipped the flask. Ron watched as one, two, three, four drops of the potion fell onto Hermione’s wound, mingling with the blood, sizzling as the drops made contact. She cried out and tried to move but Dolohov pulled her toward him. Wrapping the end of his robes around his free hand, he gripped her forearm over the wound and squeezed. Hermione whimpered and sank to the ground.

The poison was inside her now.

For a long moment there was silence. Dolohov released Hermione, letting her fall to the floor in a heap, where she sobbed. Ron struggled again, feeling renewed strength, renewed hatred. The two Death Eaters made to cuff him again, but Voldemort lifted a hand, and instead, they released him.

‘Hermione!’ he croaked, crawling toward her and scooping her into his arms, where she sobbed against his chest. He couldn’t say anything to comfort her now; tears were on his own face again as he held her. Even now she was dying, he thought desperately. Even now...

‘Dolohov, take the Mudblood into the room down the hall,’ Voldemort said briskly. ‘Seal her inside.’

‘No!’ Ron rasped, clutching Hermione to him. ‘You...you’ve already poisoned her, you bastards! Leave her alone!’ His voice was returning more strongly with each word.

‘It’s too late for her, Mr. Weasley,’ said Voldemort, in a mock-sad voice. ‘She is already dead. It’s just a matter of a few days before the poison does its work.’

‘P-please,’ Ron begged. ‘Don’t...don’t leave her alone. You’re going to kill me anyway! Let me stay with her!’

‘This tender scene is beginning to bore me,’ Voldemort said cruelly. ‘Dolohov!’

Dolohov reached down and yanked at Hermione. Ron let go of her to rush at Dolohov but his own two Death Eater captives were faster; they pulled him away from Hermione.

‘NO! GET OFF ME!’ Ron bellowed, his voice back at last. ‘HERMIONE!’

‘RON!’ Dolohov was half-carrying Hermione out of the room; she kicked and flailed.

‘HERMIONE!’ Ron screamed, and in the next instant something hard and dull smacked him on the back of the head. Immediately he saw stars again, and he slumped weakly against his captors. The room was blurry; everything was spinning he couldn’t see. Hermione was screaming, her voice was growing fainter.

‘Don’t let him pass out,’ a cold voice said. Voldemort.

Ron shook his head, trying to clear it, trying to regain his senses. Hermione--Dolohov had taken her. He could hear her screaming down the hall, and then silence.

‘I grow weary of this,’ said Voldemort. ‘The Mudblood is useful for the purpose of studying the effects of the Draught of Death. The rest of these are baggage, including Potter. It is time to end this now. Bring the Lovegood girl.’

A Death Eater grabbed Luna’s arm and yanked her to the center of the room, sending her reeling right into Neville, who caught her awkwardly. She sank against him, her

huge eyes red and swollen with tears.

'I'm sorry...I'm sorry,' she whispered, looking at Neville, then at Ron. Neville nodded and awkwardly put his arms round her.

The Death Eaters closed in. Ron's captors released him again, and he sank to the ground, landing hard on his knees. The pain brought him to himself, and he looked up. All around him were black-robed, malevolent figures. He was going to die here in this room. He'd never see Hermione again, and she would die alone.

Harry, Susan, Bill, Ginny, Neville, Luna and Ron clustered together. Only Draco Malfoy stood apart from them now. He was shaking in fear, and his eyes stared up at his father, a horrible mingling of love, adoration, hatred and betrayal in them.

'Severus,' Voldemort called.

Snape bowed low to Voldemort; he was only feet away from Ron. Ron resisted the urge to kick him.

'What is my, my Lord?' Snape asked.

'I believe I have not yet asked of you the proof of YOUR loyalty,' said Voldemort.

'I am loyal to you to the death, my Lord,' Snape said, but there was the slightest quiver in his voice.

'I am delighted to hear it,' said Voldemort dryly. 'In the meantime you will do us the honor of ridding the world of Ronald Weasley. Go as slow or as quickly as you like, so long as Potter watches.'

Bill and Ginny drew sharp breaths, and Bill grabbed Ron and stood in front of him.

'Mr. W-Weasley?' Snape stammered. Ron had never heard the Potions master stutter.

'Yes,' said Voldemort. 'But be sure to move his brother out of the way. I'm saving him for Augustus. And the sister will be for Nagini. After I'm done with her.' He gave Ginny a malevolent smile, and she whimpered and clung to Bill.

'No,' said Ron, but even as he said it he knew it was useless. And Hermione was all alone...

The Death Eaters closed the circle even tighter and Ron felt hands grabbing at them again, pulling his friends and family and Draco away from him and pushing him forward.

'Kill him,' said Voldemort, as the Death Eaters left Ron standing alone in the middle of the circle. They had begun to chant, an awful, weird chanting of words that Ron did not understand. His heart was pounding.

Snape looked at Ron, his black eyes glittering, and he raised his wand, pointing it at

Ron's chest.

'NO!' Ginny screamed, struggling against the grip of a Death Eater who yanked her away from Bill. 'Ron!' She was sobbing uncontrollably.

Ron said nothing but stared back at Snape. This is it, Ron thought. I'm going to die right here. Will it hurt? Will it be quick? What about Mum and Dad? How are they going to find out? What about Hermione? What about Ginny? And Bill? And Harry...

'Kill him,' Voldemort repeated, his voice harder.

Snape took a deep breath. Ron blinked but did not close his eyes. He would face his death standing, eyes wide open.

Snape opened his mouth.

Ron held his breath.

'EVANESCO!'

Ron opened his eyes, and time slowed down. Dammit, I shut my eyes! he thought for a tiny fraction of a second. Then another fraction of a second and he thought, wait, I'm not dead. That wasn't a Killing Curse.

And then in the final fraction of that second, Ron saw the jet of light from Snape's wand sail past him, making his hair stand on end. He heard Voldemort shriek 'SEVERUS!' and when the jet of light hit the cauldron full of the Draught of Death, it vanished.

Then Snape was turning, in a whirl of black robes, and he aimed his wand at the wall just behind Voldemort and bellowed *'REDUCTO!'*

'NO!' Voldemort screamed, and he Apparated with a crack just as the wall behind him came crashing down. And suddenly there was chaos.

Chapter Thirty-Five: Chaos and Resolution

‘MOVE!’ Harry shouted.

Ron gave a roar and shoved himself against the Death Eaters behind him--all of whom were gripping his friends, family and Draco--with all his strength. Like dominoes they fell, toppling over and hitting the ground.

‘POTTER!’ Snape yelled. ‘Take your wand! Get the others from Macnair!’

Ron dove as a jet of light from a Death Eater’s wand zoomed past; it narrowly missed Snape. Snape turned again and raised his wand to curse Lucius Malfoy, but Draco--who hadn’t been disarmed--was quicker, and he shouted the Disarming Charm at his father, sending the older Malfoy’s wand spinning out of his hand and out of sight.

‘Draco!’ Lucius screamed, but Draco yelled ‘*Impedimenta!*’ and sent Lucius flying backward, where he landed hard and was still.

‘*Accio* wands!’ Harry yelled; Ron looked up from the floor to see Harry fire a Summoning Charm at Macnair; half a dozen wands came flying in Harry’s direction. Ron leapt up and grabbed his and a few more, Hermione’s included, and Harry caught the rest.

‘Ron, look out!’ Ginny screamed, and Ron turned to see Wormtail aim his wand.

‘*Avada--*’ Wormtail began.

‘*Silencio!*’ Ron cried, and his spell struck Wormtail in the face, rendering him silent. Wormtail raised his wand again, and Ron bellowed ‘*Stupefy!*’ and Wormtail slumped to the floor, unconscious.

'Ginny!' Ron yelled. 'Take your wand! Neville!' Ron tossed Ginny her wand, started to toss Neville his, thought better of it, and instead ran to Neville, dodging a Death Eater's curse as he went.

'Neville, take it!' he yelled, shoving the wand in Neville's outstretched hand; he was still holding onto Luna, whose eyes were huge and wild and who was struggling.

'Longbottom!' came a shriek, and Ron whirled round to see Bellatrix LeStrange advancing on them.

'*Expelliarmus!*' Ron shouted, aiming his wand at Bellatrix; the spell hit her hard and she gave another shriek as her wand went flying.

'Neville, get Luna out of here!' Harry shouted, as he threw a Trip Jinx at a Death Eater and ducked to avoid a Curse from another.

Ron heard another shout, and Ginny gave a scream; he turned and saw the arm chair flying at him.

'*REDUCTO!*' Ginny yelled, and the chair burst apart and disintegrated into dust.

'Thanks, Gin!' Ron began, turning every which way, trying to find a way out of this room. He had to find Hermione.

Just then he heard another roar, and whirled around in time to see a Death Eater--Crabbe--leaping at him.

'*Impedimenta!*' Ron bellowed, and his spell slammed Crabbe in the chest, knocking him backward so hard that he slammed against the opposite wall and slumped limply to the floor, unconscious.

Ron heard Bill scream, 'Everyone get out of here!' but he could hardly see where everyone was going--nearly everyone was dressed in black; the room was dark.

He saw a flash of long blonde hair dart past him, and heard Neville yell 'Luna!'

Ron turned to see Luna grab the flask of poison, which Dolohov had set back on the mantle. Bellatrix Lestrange had her wand in hand again.

'Avada Ke--'

'Silencio!' Harry shouted, pelting her with a Silencing Charm.

'Impedimenta!' Susan added, knocking Bellatrix off her feet and onto her back, where she gasped for breath.

'Incarcerous!' Ginny screamed, and ropes appeared out of nowhere, binding Bellatrix tightly.

'Luna!' Neville yelled. 'Look out!'

Luna whirled around, wandless, to see Augustus Rookwood barreling toward her. She still had the flask of poison in her hand.

'Accio flask!' Rookwood screamed. The flask jerked in Luna's hand but didn't budge; the poison inside slopped over the side of the flask, a little of it hitting Luna's fingers. She didn't seem to care; her eyes were huge and looked almost possessed. Rookwood, furious that his spell hadn't worked, launched himself at her. Luna gave a scream--it was more than a scream, it seemed to come from somewhere deep within her, like the shriek of a great bird of prey--and, gripping the flask tightly, hurled the entire contents of the flask in Rookwood's face.

He screamed as the poison splashed into his eyes and mouth and, blinded, began to flail about mindlessly.

Neville, meanwhile, pointed his wand at Rookwood and shouted *'Stupefy!'*

'I have the book, Neville!' Luna shrieked, holding up *The Book of Morgan Le Fey* in her hands that Rookwood had taken from Hermione earlier.

'Luna, Neville, go!' Harry yelled. Suddenly there was a massive crack. The Dark Lord had Apparated back into the room.

'POTTER!' Voldemort's voice screamed out over all the others and he raced at Harry.

'Reducto!' Harry shouted, aiming for the ceiling just above Voldemort's head. Huge chunks of plaster came raining down, missing Voldemort but catching his robes and tripping him up.

'Harry, come on!' Susan screamed, stunning yet another Death Eater.

Harry turned to go but then Ron yelled, 'Susan, look out!'

Voldemort aimed his wand at Susan and bellowed 'Your girlfriend suffers, Potter! *Crucio!*'

‘NO!’ Harry cried, and he threw himself in front of Susan, facing her, and taking the spell full strength across the back. He screamed in pain and fell toward into Susan, knocking her down, but then something incredible happened. The spell seemed to reverberate and shot back toward Voldemort.

‘What?’ Voldemort yelled in surprise, and the spell caught him across the chest. He shrieked and fell backward onto the rubble of ceiling.

‘Harry, what did you--’ Ron began.

‘Get out of here!’ Harry screamed, leaping to his feet, as though entirely unaffected by the Cruciatus Curse Voldemort had just thrown at him. Harry grabbed Susan’s hand and they dashed out of the room. Bill came in behind them, along with Ginny; they fired spell after spell at the remaining Death Eaters.

Then came Snape.

‘Get going, Weasley!’ Snape hissed. ‘Find Granger!’

Ron dashed to the door and as he rounded the corner he heard Luna, Neville and Draco Malfoy all yelling. Ron hoped Luna had managed to find a wand somewhere.

Ron set to banging on the doors.

‘Hermione!’ he screamed, his throat raw.

‘Ron!’ Her voice was muffled. Not behind that door, Ron thought. He banged on the next one. And the next.

‘Hermione!’ he yelled. ‘Where are you?’

‘IN HERE!’ she screamed, banging on the door from the inside. It was the next door down.

‘I’m coming!’ he yelled.

‘I’m sealed in!’ she cried.

Ron was halfway to her door, his wand out, ready to break open the door with a Reductor curse if he had to, but suddenly something hard and heavy hit him from behind and sent him sprawling; he fell into the room next to Hermione’s, where they’d found Eddie, and he landed hard, smacking his wand hand on the wood floor. His wand went skittering beneath the bed.

Ron dove as he heard the whooshing of another jet of light come at him; the mirror above the mantle shattered and shards of glass flew everywhere. He shut his eyes tightly as bits of glass slashed at his face and hands.

When he opened his eyes, Dolohov was standing over him, pointing his wand at him. Ron swallowed and felt almost sick. He'd failed. Dolohov was going to kill him now.

'How shall I kill you, Weasley?' he said, in his heavily accented voice. 'How much pain do you think you can stand?'

'Shut up and do it, you bastard,' Ron growled.

Dolohov laughed. 'On second thought, perhaps it would be more fun...without wands. It's hardly sporting of me, is it, to kill you while you're defenseless.'

Ron glared at him and felt rage begin to boil in his blood.

'Let's do this like men, shall we, Weasley?' Dolohov taunted, and he tossed his wand across the room, where it landed neatly on a bedside table. 'Hand to hand? After all, you need to avenge your girlfriend!'

A surge of hatred pounded through Ron, turning his blood to ice, and he leapt up off the ground.

Dolohov ran at him. Ron held his ground until the very moment Dolohov reached him, then leapt aside, kicking out hard with his right leg. He caught Dolohov in the stomach and the Death Eater fell, coughing. Ron jumped.

Or more correctly, fell, crashing onto Dolohov with such force that a few of Dolohov's ribs cracked. Dolohov screamed and swung, connecting with Ron's browbone.

A cut opened up and blood dripped into Ron's eye, blinding him. Dolohov shoved him in the chest, knocking him back, and leapt up, panting and clutching his ribs.

Ron wiped blood from his eye and stood up unsteadily, his head spinning from the punch.

'Is that the best you can do, Weasley?' Dolohov yelled, laughing again, then wincing and clutching his ribs.

'No,' Ron snarled, and he pounced again. Dolohov tried to sidestep him, but the pain of his broken ribs seemed to slow him down. Ron plowed into him, sending him

hurtling backwards and into the far wall of the room, so hard that the plaster cracked. Dolohov twisted and managed to swing his fist, where it glanced off Ron's jaw. Ron didn't even feel it; adrenaline was pumping through his body. Dolohov swung again, but Ron blocked the punch, shoved the Death Eater's arm downward, and viciously banged his forehead against Dolohov's.

The moment their foreheads made contact Ron questioned the wisdom of using a head-butt as a defensive move. Stars spun in his eyes, and Dolohov, though woozy himself, seized the advantage and shoved at Ron, hard. Ron felt himself falling, and he grabbed at the Death Eater's robes and pulled him down with him.

They rolled, and Ron's momentum allowed him to land on top of Dolohov. He jumped up again, ignoring the throbbing in his browbone, shaking his head to clear it; the skin around the cut had begun to swell.

He swayed on his feet and was just working out what to do next when a huge CRACK! split the air; it sounded distant, as though it happened down the hall. Had someone else just Apparated?

A horrible, piercing shriek filled the air and several more loud cracks sounded in the room next door.

'Luna, Harry, Neville, Susan, Draco!' a voice yelled. 'Go!'

Ron shook his head. It sounded like...Lupin. Which could only mean...the Order had arrived. However thin their ranks.

The grunt from across the room told Ron that Dolohov was up and moving, about to strike.

Ron was ready--his fist shot out and connected with Dolohov's cheekbone, shattering it. Dolohov screamed and Ron groaned through gritted teeth and the pain in his knuckles. Dolohov responded with a kick so swift and hard Ron didn't see it, and didn't even feel it until the breath was knocked out of him for what felt like the hundredth time that day; Dolohov's foot had connected with Ron's stomach. Ron gasped and coughed and doubled over, and Dolohov again seized the advantage; he leapt onto Ron's back and pulled him up, closing his forearm tightly round Ron's throat.

Ron gasped again and struggled, but the Death Eater's fury gave him the strength to hold on. He could feel Dolohov's breath in his ear, hear him laughing madly as he squeezed on Ron's windpipe. Ron began to see spots as he furiously pulled at Dolohov's unyielding arm.

This is it, he thought. I'm going to suffocate. The spots grew larger in front of Ron's eyes. He had no wand, he couldn't do anything. He had no air, he couldn't breathe...

'RON!'

Hermione's voice penetrated the walls of the room, and Ron's brain--oxygen deprived as it was--returned to itself for just a moment. In that moment, Ron saw everything in his life; his childhood, meeting Harry, meeting Hermione, six years of school together, fun and horror and love and anger and frustration and triumph. And something in his body, in his veins, in his heart screamed for release. Ron took a great gulp and focused his entire being on the Death Eater choking him, and it happened: a great surge of electricity shot through his body, so powerful it was almost painful. Dolohov gave a surprised cry as he was thrown away from Ron, the electric charge so powerful it sent him crashing across the room.

Ron gasped and gulped air, as much as he could. He staggered over to the bed. He'd escaped Dolohov for that moment, but wandless magic wouldn't save him. He was tired, he didn't know how long he could hold the Death Eater off. He needed his wand; he needed to end this and get Hermione the hell out of there. He knelt by the bed and saw it, just out of reach. His own wand. He dove again and shoved at the bed and grabbed for it.

'NO!' Dolohov yelled, and just as Ron's fingers closed round his wand, he looked up to see Dolohov's wand flying across the room; Dolohov had managed to summon his wand to him. Ron twisted round on the floor to lie on his back, gripping his wand tightly; Dolohov's wand landed neatly in his hand and he raised it slowly and laughed.

'You'll join your Mudblood whore,' he hissed. Ron felt another surge of rage and slashed his wand at Dolohov.

'*Avada--*' *Dolohov* began.

'*Diffindo!*'

Dolohov gasped, and Ron heard it first--a ripping sound. Then he saw it. Blood. Great quantities of it, spilling from the slash Ron had made; the slash across Dolohov's throat. The Death Eater went white and made a sickening, gurgling sound and

clutched at his throat as blood spilled over his fingers. His mouth worked, he tried to speak, but the wound had silenced his voice.

And then he fell, and Ron saw the very light dim in the Death Eater's eyes before he sank to the floor, leaking blood from his throat, landing in a heap of black robes.

Ron stared at the crumpled form of the dead Death Eater on the ground for a long moment.

'Blimey,' he heard himself say.

'Ron!'

Ron blinked. 'Hermione!' he yelled. He leapt up from the floor and ran out into the corridor again and to Hermione's door.

'Ron, please get me out!'

He raised his wand, pointed it at the door and yelled '*Alohomora!*' The door glowed briefly but didn't open.

'It won't open!' Ron yelled, pounding on the door furiously, yanking at the handle. 'What do I do?'

'Weasley!' Ron whirled around. It was Draco Malfoy.

'Malfoy, help me open this door!' Ron snapped. '*Alohomora* won't work!'

Malfoy glared at Ron for a long moment. He held his wand in his hand, and for a few seconds Ron wondered whether Draco would curse him and run after his father and beg forgiveness for letting Lucius down.

'Maybe if we both use it,' Draco said, and Ron nodded, and they both pointed their wands at the door and said '*Alohomora!*' Nothing.

‘Bloody hell!’ Ron bellowed.

‘Ron!’ Hermione screamed.

‘Oh, for god’s sake,’ Malfoy snapped. ‘Get back, Weasley.’ He yanked Ron back from the door and stood back himself.

‘Stand back from the door, Granger!’ he yelled, and without waiting to determine whether Hermione had in fact done this, he aimed his wand at the door and said ‘*Reducto!*’

The door burst apart, and Ron shoved Malfoy out of the way and burst into the room. And stopped dead in his tracks.

Lucius Malfoy was there, and he was holding Hermione in a vise grip, with his wand pointed at her throat.

‘Let her go, Malfoy,’ Ron said at once. ‘Don’t hurt her.’

Lucius laughed. ‘She’s already dead, you idiot. Which means she’s worthless to me.’

‘Then let her go!’ Ron snapped.

‘Where’s my son?’ Lucius hissed. ‘You bring me Draco, and I give you the Mudblood.’

Ron swallowed and his eyes met Hermione’s. She was very pale; she had wrapped her arm in a piece of cloth she’d torn from the Death Eater robe.

‘I dunno know where that prat you call a son is,’ he said, still clutching his wand. ‘Maybe your boss got him.’

‘My “boss” is busy at the moment,’ Lucius snapped. ‘I know you know where he is, Weasley. Find him, and I’ll hand over the Mudblood--’

‘I’m here, Father,’ said Draco, and he appeared in the doorway and strode up to stand just behind Ron.

‘Ah, Draco,’ said Lucius. ‘This has certainly turned into a day full of surprises. For me and for you.’

Draco glared at Lucius. ‘Is that what you call murdering my mother? A surprise?’

‘It had to be done,’ Lucius said, and his voice actually sounded a bit sad. ‘One day you’ll understand.’

‘Go to hell,’ Draco spat.

‘Or perhaps not,’ said Lucius, smirking. ‘In any case, Draco, you have cost me my Lord’s favor and humiliated me in front of my peers.’

‘I’m happy to disappoint you,’ said Draco.

Ron watched this exchange with growing apprehension and impatience. Hermione had a deadly poison inside her and these two were in the midst of their father/son rubbish. As far as Ron was concerned he didn’t care if Lucius and Draco killed one another, so long as he got Hermione out of there.

‘Draco, Draco,’ Lucius said, shaking his head. ‘You could have been great, like me. But alas. You lack the courage for greatness.’

‘You really think there’s anything you can say to me now that will hurt me?’ Draco hissed. ‘I’ve already heard all of it, Father. Let the Mudblood go and let’s have this out, shall we? She’s as good as dead, anyway.’

Ron shot Draco a murderous look, but when Draco’s eyes met his, Ron noticed something at once. Draco’s grey eyes flicked briefly over their wands, then at Hermione, then back at him. And Ron understood.

‘You do have a point, son,’ said Lucius. ‘But then again, I was just thinking it might be rather fun to finish the Mudblood off once and for all, seeing as you lacked the nerve to do it yourself--’

‘*Stupefy!*’ Draco shouted, and his spell hit Hermione right in the chest. She slumped heavily against Lucius and the reverberation of the spell caused him to stumble. Ron acted; he pointed his wand at Lucius and shouted ‘*Stupefy!*’ and the Death Eater, too, slumped to the floor.

Ron raced to Hermione and lifted her gently from the floor, pointed his wand at her and said ‘*Enervate.*’

Her eyes fluttered open.

‘Oh!’ she gasped. ‘Ron!’

‘Mione,’ Ron said, and he pulled her into the fiercest embrace of his life.

She clutched him back and began to sob.

‘I’ve got you,’ Ron said breathlessly. ‘I’ve got you. Let’s get out of here!’

‘Ron,’ Hermione sobbed. ‘Ron, I’m--’

‘We’re going to get you out of this!’ Ron yelled, not totally believing it. ‘I’m not going to let you die!’

‘O-okay,’ she stammered, and she let him help her up. He handed her her wand. ‘I can walk. I’m okay. I--’ She stopped speaking when she saw Draco Malfoy standing over the unconscious, and now bound form of his father. Draco’s face was white with hatred and he was pointing his wand at Lucius.

‘Malfoy, what are you doing?’ Hermione asked.

‘Go on,’ said Draco, in a strangely flat voice. ‘I just have to finish this.’

‘Malfoy, you can’t--’ Hermione began, her eyes wide with horror.

‘Yeah, I can, Granger,’ said Draco furiously, turning his icy grey eyes on her. ‘He deserves to die.’

‘Maybe he does, but you can’t kill him!’ Hermione cried. ‘You’re not like him! You-- you couldn’t cut me, remember? You’re not like him!’

‘He killed my mother!’ Draco raged.

Ron groaned.

‘Bloody hell, Malfoy!’ he shouted. ‘If you kill your stupid father you’ll be a murderer just like him and you won’t get the satisfaction of seeing him go to prison and in any case we don’t have time for all your family crap because in case it escaped your notice we’re under attack by your former mates! Now get the bloody hell out of here!’

And before Draco could protest, Ron grabbed the smaller boy roughly by the collar and yanked him out of the room.

‘No, Weasley!’ he yelled. ‘Dammit, let me go!’

‘Shut up, Malfoy!’ Ron snapped, rolling his eyes; his other hand clutched Hermione’s and he shoved Malfoy roughly out into the corridor and slammed the door shut behind him.

Just then another explosion shook the corridor. Ron stumbled, his shoulder wrenching painfully; Draco fell against him, then Hermione, and they all went down. Remus Lupin tumbled out of the master bedroom, clutching a wound in his shoulder.

Ron blinked through the dust and felt his heart almost stop as Peter Pettigrew--Wormtail--stepped through the door. His right hand glowed silver and was covered with blood.

‘Professor Lupin!’ Ron yelled. Lupin’s eyes rolled back and he fell forward with a crash.

Hermione, meanwhile, raised her wand.

‘*Petrificus Totalus!*’ she shouted, and her spell struck Wormtail square between the eyes. He went rigid at once, dropped his wand, and crashed to the floor. Draco then snapped ‘*Incarcerous*’, and ropes bound Wormtail from shoulder to ankle.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ Hermione said anxiously.

Ron nodded, only now noticing that her face looked flushed and sweaty, her eyes glassy. Was a fever already starting in her? He had to get her out of here, had to get her to the hospital wing, or St. Mungo’s.

‘Weasley, Granger!’

Ron and Hermione looked up to find Draco Malfoy leaning over Lupin, whose face had gone white and who barely seemed to be conscious. Nymphadora Tonks was cradling Lupin’s head in her lap. She looked up; there were tears on her face.

‘We have to get him to the hospital,’ she cried. ‘Wormtail--he slashed him. The

silver--it's poison to him!'

Ron blinked and strode toward her, Hermione just behind him.

'We've got a Portkey,' he said quickly. 'Down at the cemetery. Hermione needs to be in hospital, too. Help me carry him, Malfoy.'

Draco looked up and nodded, his face expressionless.

Together Ron and Draco hoisted the limp form of Lupin onto their shoulders; Lupin, always thin and lanky, nonetheless felt heavy, deadweight. They dragged him to the stairs.

They had just started down the stairs when Susan, Neville and Luna came bursting through the massive hole in the wall.

'Look out!' Susan screamed.

Tonks and Hermione whirled around, wands at the ready, as Bellatrix Lestrange and Crabbe leapt into the corridor. Neville threw a curse at Bellatrix, but she gave a yell and seemed to merely shrug it off. She laughed.

'You cannot kill me, Longbottom!'

Crabbe turned and raised his wand, aiming it at Tonks and Hermione, who both were quicker. Tonks shouted '*Impedimenta!*' even as Hermione screamed '*Expelliarmus!*' Crabbe flew backward and slammed into the wall, his wand soaring out of his hand and over the banister, to clatter on the floor below. He slumped over, out cold.

'Go!' Tonks shouted at Ron, Draco, Susan, Hermione and Neville. 'Get out of here!'

'We're not leaving you alone!' Susan yelled.

'*Serpensortia!*' Bellatrix shrieked, pointing her wand at Tonks. A huge snake exploded out of the end of Bellatrix's wand and landed right on top of Tonks. She fell backwards and the snake reared its head to strike.

'*Evanescio!*' Susan screamed; the snake vanished in a puff of smoke.

Bellatrix gave a howl and raised her wand again, but then Neville took aim and screamed '*Accido!*' and she fell back against the banister. Neville had a wild, frenzied look on his face.

Bellatrix shook her head and stood, still gripping her wand. 'Is that the best you can

do, Longbottom? You're not nearly so talented as your father!'

'IMPEDIMENTA!'

The spell struck Bellatrix in the chest. She flew backward, still holding her wand, smashing the railing into bits. She began to fall; she gave a howl and waved her wand, and she stopped in mid-air.

Hovering high above the ground floor now, she laughed gleefully and turned to Ron and Draco. Ron stumbled slightly, trying to lift his wand without dropping Lupin, but it was no use.

'I'll be sure to tell your father you said good-bye, Draco!' Bellatrix shrieked, but in the next instant, another scream burst the air.

'REDUCTO!'

Neville's Reductor Curse hit the chandelier hanging directly above Bellatrix. In the split second that the base of the chandelier shattered, Ron gasped and stumbled again, dropping Lupin's feet.

'Weasley!' Draco snapped, but Ron gripped the sides of his head as the vision--the one he'd had the summer before, the one he'd forgotten about, filled his brain. Screams, horrible and ear-splitting. And red. Blood everywhere.

And Ron opened his eyes to see and hear Bellatrix screaming as the chandelier plummeted, smashing into her and sending her crashing to the floor.

The explosive landing seemed to shake the whole house. The crystal in the chandelier shattered and sprayed; Ron shut his eye, threw up his arm, and whirled around to stand in front of Lupin, but bits of glass slashed at Ron's forehead and wrist. Draco cried out and Ron saw that a piece of glass had opened up a large gash in his cheek. Hermione, Neville and Tonks had dived to the floor, their faces down.

For what seemed like an eternity, there was silence. Ron slowly opened his eyes and turned. He heard the crunch of footsteps above and looked up to see Tonks, Neville and Hermione staring below them. Ron looked down, swallowing.

Bellatrix Lestrange lay twisted among the metal of the chandelier; her face and arms were slashed. The center of the chandelier disappeared inside a large hole in her chest. Her eyes were wide open, their expression fearful and furious. Blood was everywhere,

pooling onto the floor. She was dead.

Neville stared at the woman who'd tortured his parents, but he didn't look smug or satisfied at what he'd done. He only looked horrified.

'Come on, Neville,' said Tonks, taking his hand gently. 'Let's get out of here.'

Neville nodded and he in turn took Luna's hand, and the three of them started down the stairs.

'Wait!' Susan cried. 'Harry!'

Ron's head snapped up. 'Where is he?' How on earth could he have forgotten Harry?

Suddenly they heard a shout from downstairs.

'Malfoy, take Lupin!' Ron snapped, as he raced down the stairs.

'Ron, wait!' Hermione screamed, and she barreled after him, followed by Susan.

A crash came from the living room, and Ron dashed into the room, followed by Susan and Hermione, in time to see Harry throw a Reductor Curse at the china cabinet, which Voldemort had bewitched to fly straight at him. Harry was bleeding from a gash in his leg; his Death Eater robes were torn to shreds. He was sweating and he looked near collapse.

'You cannot beat me, Potter!' Voldemort screamed.

'Harry!' Susan cried. She lifted her wand and ran toward Voldemort; Ron tried to reach for Susan's sleeve, to hold her back, but she was too fast.

‘Susan, NO!’ Harry cried.

Voldemort turned and aimed his wand at Susan.

‘*Avada Kedavra!*’ he shouted, at the exact moment Harry yelled ‘*Protego!*’ and dove in front of Susan.

Susan and Hermione both screamed as the jet of green light from Voldemort’s wand sped toward her, but it collided with the red beam of light from Harry’s wand, and Ron felt his jaw drop as something extraordinary happened. The two beams of light joined and formed a single golden light, and both Harry’s and Voldemort’s wands began to vibrate. Both of them were frozen in place, but for their trembling as they fought back the other’s curse.

‘Get out of here!’ Harry gasped. ‘I can’t hold him for long!’

‘Ron!’ Hermione shrieked, and she raced to his side as Ron grabbed Susan and pulled her back.

‘What are you doing?’ Harry cried. ‘Get out of here!’ The golden beam of light split and became dozens of threads of light that began to grow, expand, and

make a web.

‘What’s happening?’ Ron shouted.

‘*Priori Incantatem!*’ Hermione yelled, and Ron stared as figures--gray, pearly figures began to spill from the tip of Voldemort’s wand. ‘A reverse glance of all the curses he’s used, and all the people he’s killed!’

‘What can we do?’ Ron cried.

‘We can’t do anything to Voldemort as long as he’s inside that web!’ Hermione fretted.

Voldemort gave an unearthly shriek and tried to jerk his wand away, but Harry mirrored his movement, and the connection between their wands burned hotter and brighter. More and more people spilled from Voldemort’s wand, and then Ron saw them--two grey figures that were Harry’s parents. Harry looked up at them and smiled.

‘Harry, break the connection!’ Hermione yelled, holding up her wand. Ron and Susan followed suit.

Voldemort looked at the three of them and screamed. ‘NO! I will kill all of you!’

‘Do it!’ Hermione screamed, and Ron stared at the figures of Harry’s parents as they nodded. Harry nodded back. Ron gripped his wand and pointed it at Voldemort. Susan and Hermione were doing the same. Ron had no idea if they could do anything against the Darkest Wizard who ever lived, but if it could help Harry beat him...

‘NOW!’ Harry screamed, and he jerked his wand away, severing the connection. Voldemort hissed, aimed his wand at Ron and shouted the Killing Curse just as Susan and Hermione screamed ‘*EXPELLIARMUS!*’ Ron dropped to the floor as the jet of green light raced overhead, just missing him and the girls. Voldemort jerked backward as the girls’ spells hit him, but he didn’t drop his wand. Ron leapt up and he and Harry both shouted ‘*IMPEDIMENTA!*’, and Voldemort went hurtling back against the wall with a crash. He slumped to the floor and was still.

Harry advanced on him, shaking off Ron’s grip on his arm.

‘I have to finish it,’ he said, and he raised his wand and pointed it at Voldemort.

At that moment, the red eyes opened and Voldemort gave a hiss, and Harry screamed and his knees buckled; his hand flew to his scar.

'Impedimenta!' Ron cried, sending a jinx at Voldemort; it bounced off him as if it were nothing and Voldemort gave a laugh, and then Harry turned slowly and spoke, but it was in Voldemort's voice.

'He is mine,' Harry/Voldemort hissed. 'And all of you will die.'

And suddenly, both Harry and Voldemort were raising their wands and aiming them at Ron, Susan and Hermione.

'Harry, no!' Hermione screamed.

'Harry--' Ron began, horrified, and he stood in front of Hermione and Susan.

Harry's body began to tremble, and he opened his mouth and Voldemort hissed 'Kill them.' Harry pointed his wand at Ron's heart.

Ron gulped. Of all the scenarios he'd played over in his mind, this had never occurred to him. That Voldemort would act through Harry, and kill them all. That it would be as much a mental battle as a physical one.

'Harry, it's me!' Ron yelled. 'It's Ron!'

Harry clenched his teeth, and his free hand clutched his scar, which was glowing, and for a moment, his green eyes flashed red. And then he gave an ear-splitting scream.

'NO!'

And Harry's eyes and his voice were his again.

And suddenly Voldemort, too, was screaming, and falling backward from the force of Harry's resistance, and then Harry was falling, falling forward, and Ron, Hermione and Susan all raised their wands and shouted 'Stupefy!' but before their spells could strike, there was a vicious crack!

Voldemort had Disapparated.

'Harry!' Ron shouted, and he bent forward and turned Harry over; he was unconscious.

'We have to get him out of here,' said Hermione, her voice oddly distant, 'in case Voldemort comes back.'

'Harry,' Susan whimpered.

'Hermione, are you--' Ron began, feeling a new rush of fear. She was very pale now.

'Fine,' said Hermione, waving his hand away.

Tonks appeared then, with Draco, Neville and Luna. Lupin was hovering, his head lolling forward.

'Harry,' Tonks said. 'What happened?'

'Voldemort,' said Ron, lifting Harry up. 'We have to get out of here. We have to find Bill and Ginny and the Portkey.'

Tonks pointed her wand at Harry and muttered '*Mobilicorpus*.'

Draco went ahead, wand out, his Death Eater robe thrown aside. Ron let Tonks go by him, directing Lupin and Harry's progress. Neville went behind her. Finally came Hermione, her wand out. Her hands were shaking and she was sweating. Her eyes were red and feverish

'Hermione?' said Ron tentatively. 'Are you--'

'I'm--I'm okay,' she said, nodding. 'I--' But she didn't finish speaking. Her eyes rolled back, revealing the whites of her bloodshot irises, and she slumped forward.

'Hermione!' Ron yelled, catching her in his arms. 'No, no, please no.' He scooped her up in his arms. Her head lolled.

'Stay with me, Hermione,' said Ron desperately. 'We're going to get you to Madam Pomfrey right now. She'll be able to cure you, I know it!' But even as Ron said this he knew it was no use. The antidote for the poison racing through Hermione's veins had surely been destroyed, just as the poison itself had been.

'Too--too late, Ron,' she muttered, lifting her head painfully and looking up at him. Tears were in her eyes.

'No!' Ron snapped, 'You'll be fine.' He followed Tonks and the others outside, where the bodies of several dead Death Eaters lay. Snape was there, levitating them to lie side by side.

'Ron!'

Ron looked up from Hermione's sweaty face to see Bill and Ginny running toward them. They were bruised and dirty.

'Bill!' Ron screamed. 'We have to go back now! Hermione--she's sick! And Harry and Lupin! Where's the Portkey? Tell me we still have the bloody Portkey!'

'It's gone,' said Bill. 'Vol--Voldemort destroyed it.'

'No,' Ron said, feeling helpless. Tonks had lowered Harry and Lupin onto a soft patch of grass and strode over to Bill. The night was cloudless but dark. The stars were winking down at them all, beautiful and bright. Ron cradled Hermione in his arms, at a loss for what to do.

'Where is Voldemort?' Bill snapped.

‘Disappeared,’ said Tonks shortly, gazing worriedly at Lupin. ‘I don’t think he’ll be back tonight. Most of his crew here is either dead or in custody.’

‘Bill!’ They turned to see a tall, muscular black wizard with a bald head and a glittering gold earring striding toward them. It was Kingsley Shacklebolt.

‘Kingsley,’ said Bill, taking charge again. ‘We have to get these three to St. Mungo’s right now.’

‘Wait!’ a female voice said. It was Luna. But Bill and Kingsley ignored her.

‘We’ll just have to make a bunch of new Portkeys,’ Bill was saying. ‘Get everyone to St. Mungo’s--Hogwarts won’t have what we need.’

‘Too late,’ Hermione moaned. ‘Not enough time.’

‘Wait!’ Luna cried again.

‘Please, Luna, we--we have to concentrate, all right?’ Bill said tersely, turning back to Kingsley.

‘But I have--’

‘Quiet!’ Snape snapped, joining Tonks, Kingsley and Bill.

‘I HAVE THE ANTIDOTE!’ Luna screamed. They all turned to look at her.

‘Wh-what?’ Bill said at last, when they had all recovered themselves.

‘I--I have the antidote,’ said Luna again, timidly. ‘I--I took some, from the cauldron. It’s in this flask.’ She reached inside her robes and pulled out a small but very full flask with a cork stopper. Inside was a radiantly turquoise, opalescent liquid that glowed brightly in the dark of the night.

Ron could have danced with glee. Instead he shouted, ‘Bring it here, we need to give some to Hermione!’

‘It’s--it’s not finished,’ Luna said quickly. ‘It needs a few more ingredients.’

‘What?’ Ron and Tonks yelled, exasperated.

‘We have to go back. To Hogwarts,’ said Luna. ‘I have to finish making the potion. The ingredients here were destroyed in the battle. But--but the school would have them.’

‘Well, what are we waiting for? Let’s go!’ Ron bellowed.

‘Luna, we need to get them to St. Mungo’s--’

‘The potion can’t be made there!’ Luna cried. ‘St. Mungo’s doesn’t have *mimbulus mimbletonia* plants, does it?’

‘What?’ Bill asked, puzzled.

‘But--but Neville does,’ said Luna, looking over at Neville and smiling at him weakly.

‘Come on!’ Ron yelled, wishing they would quit arguing. Every minute they spent here was bringing Hermione a minute closer to dying. More black spots had appeared, on her arms now.

‘There’s Floo Powder in the living room,’ said Susan. ‘I saw it. We can use it to go right to the hospital wing.’

‘Let’s do it,’ said Bill firmly, abandoning the idea of Portkeys. ‘Kingsley?’

‘All right,’ said Kingsley. ‘I’ll get back to headquarters and make my report to Arthur.’

‘COME ON!’ Ron bellowed.

Taking their cue from him, they followed Ron into the house; Tonks levitated Harry and Lupin. Neville and Luna brought up the rear; Luna had returned the flask of antidote to her robe pocket.

They reached the living room; the tables and chairs had been overturned. The bodies of two Death Eaters were sprawled across the floor, spattered with blood, along with the detritus of Voldemort’s battle with Harry.

Snape wrinkled his nose in distaste. ‘The Ministry will have a time of it, cleaning up this mess,’ he said sourly.

‘There it is,’ said Susan, pointing to a large ceramic pot on the mantle.

‘Ron, you go first,’ said Bill.

Ron shoved his way to the front. Hermione moaned again, now only half-conscious. Ron hoisted her up a little and took a handful of the Floo Powder. He hurled it into the fire and said, very loudly and clearly, ‘HOGWARTS’ HOSPITAL WING!’

Don’t die, Hermione, he thought silently. Don’t die. She opened her eyes and looked up at him; a delirious expression was on her face as Ron stepped with her into the flames, and everything began to spin.

Chapter Thirty-Six: The Cure

Ron felt his feet slam onto a hard stone surface. He shook his head and blinked and found himself standing in the fireplace of the hospital wing.

‘What on earth!’ Madam Pomfrey came rushing toward him.

The wing was half-full of patients, all of whom were asleep. Ron didn’t much care if he woke them up, he was so frantic.

‘Madam Pomfrey!’ Ron yelled, climbing out of the fireplace. ‘Hermione-- she’s sick. She needs--’

‘Get her to that bed,’ Madam Pomfrey ordered, and Ron obeyed, carrying Hermione to a nearby bed and laying her down gently on top. She was fully unconscious now.

A series of pops announced the arrival of the others.

‘Good heavens!’ Madam Pomfrey cried. ‘What is going on?’

Bill stepped out of the fireplace. ‘Long story, Poppy, but we need a cauldron. Severus, take Luna to your storerooms; she’ll tell you what she needs.’

‘Follow me, Miss Lovegood,’ said Snape imperiously.

‘Wait a minute!’ Madam Pomfrey snapped. ‘Severus, that girl has been injured! I insist--’

‘Poppy, please, we’re in a hurry,’ Bill pleaded.

‘I’m fine, Madam Pomfrey,’ said Luna. She didn’t look fine, Ron thought. She looked slightly mad, she was filthy, her hands were caked with dried blood and her clothes ripped, but she hurried after Snape.

‘Neville, we’ll need your plant,’ said Bill. Neville tore out of the hospital wing.

‘Ginny--follow him,’ said Bill. ‘He’ll have forgotten--’

‘The password, right,’ said Ginny. She hurried out of the hospital wing.

Bill set Harry down on a bed next to Hermione. Another pop, and Draco appeared. Then came Tonks with Lupin, and Susan with Harry.

‘Good heavens!’ Madam Pomfrey repeated. ‘Remus! And Potter!’

‘Remus was slashed with a silver blade,’ said Bill. ‘Is there anything you can do?’

Pomfrey looked up Tonks, who was trembling and tearful.

‘It’s...doubtful,’ Pomfrey said. ‘But I’ll try.’

‘If you can’t help him, we’ll take him to St. Mungo’s,’ said Bill. ‘Harry, too.’

Madam Pomfrey wasted no time; she set to work immediately. She disappeared into her office and a moment later came out, wheeling a cart whose shelves were full to bursting of potions, salves and bandages.

She began to poke and prod at Harry.

‘What happened to him?’ she snapped.

Bill looked a bit lost at this; Susan was sobbing silently and seemed incapable of talking. Ron, who was clutching Hermione’s hand hard, spoke up.

‘He fought Voldemort,’ he said.

‘Dear god,’ Pomfrey gasped.

‘Voldemort tried to possess him,’ Ron explained. ‘But Harry resisted and...and it made him pass out. At least, that’s what it looked like.’

Pomfrey nodded and looked back down at Harry. ‘I don’t think there’s anything to be done with him but wait until he wakes up. His color isn’t good, but his pulse and breathing are steady. I’ll need to prepare a few quick salves for that leg wound. I don’t

want to move him from here unless it becomes absolutely necessary.'

'Very well,' said Bill. 'And Remus?'

But Pomfrey was already preparing a syringe of some green liquid, which she injected into Lupin's bruised right arm.

'This will slow the effects of the silver,' she said. 'I'll have to put together something stronger if we're going to save his life, but this will buy me some time.'

Tonks whimpered and Bill put his arm round her shoulders.

The doors to the hospital wing opened. Neville, Ginny, Luna, Snape and Professors Flitwick and Sprout sailed in. Snape was carrying a small cauldron; Luna, the flask of incomplete antidote and the Book of Morgan Le Fey. Neville had his mimbulus mimbletonia in his arms. Sprout was in her dressing gown of grass green and carrying a large beaker in her arms. It was only then that Ron realized it was--according to the clock in the hospital wing--five o'clock in the morning. The faintest hint of daylight could be seen on the horizon.

'What on earth is going on?' Sprout demanded. Then her eyes fell on Harry. 'Oh, my! Potter! And Remus, and...oh dear! Miss Granger!'

'They're alive, Minerva,' said Madam Pomfrey. 'We may have to take Lupin to St. Mungo's--'

'Wait,' said Luna. 'The potion--it will cure him.'

Madam Pomfrey looked at her dubiously.

'Are you sure?' she asked, over raised eyebrows.

'Yes,' said Luna, her eyes wide and almost dreamy, like they had been so often before.

'Poppy, we have to let Miss Lovegood try,' said Flitwick.

‘All right, then,’ said Pomfrey briskly. ‘I suppose you should get started. If there is anything else you need...’

‘I have everything I need,’ said Luna.

‘Severus,’ said Bill, gesturing to Snape. Bill pulled a small table in between Lupin’s and Hermione’s beds.

‘Poppy, can you see to Hermione, then check on Ron and Mr. Malfoy?’ Bill asked gently, and Madam Pomfrey--normally the only one allowed to give orders in the hospital wing--nodded.

‘Step back, Mr. Weasley,’ she ordered. ‘I need to give her an injection.’

‘Will it help?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know,’ said Pomfrey, ‘but it’s the best I can do at the moment.’

Ron nodded and stepped back, and Pomfrey lifted Hermione’s limp right arm.

‘Fever,’ Pomfrey said. ‘And black spots. Dear god. Is this child carrying the Plague?’

‘Y-yes,’ said Ron.

‘In that case, Miss Lovegood, you had better make sure whatever it is you’re making is enough to distribute to this whole hospital wing,’ Pomfrey snapped. ‘Plague isn’t usually airborne but if there’s Dark Magic involved--’

‘There is,’ said Ron.

‘--then we could all be contaminated.’

‘There’ll be enough,’ said Luna.

‘Good,’ said Madam Pomfrey, and she lowered Hermione’s arm. ‘Mr. Weasley, let me take a look at you.’

Ron submitted, and told her that he’d been hit with the Cruciatus Curse, and that his shoulder hurt, and that a tooth was loose.

Madam Pomfrey nodded, and without a word, she picked through the many potions on her cart and pulled out two, and measured out doses for Ron on a heavy wooden spoon.

‘Take these,’ she ordered. ‘One will help with muscle soreness, the other will repair your damaged shoulder--looks like some tendons tore a bit.’

Ron obeyed silently and swallowed both spoonfuls of the foul-tasting potions.

‘Open your mouth,’ Pomfrey snapped, and he did, and she mumbled something, gave her wand a wave, and his tooth was fixed.

‘You’re all fixed, Mr. Weasley,’ she said briskly. ‘Now, Mr. Malfoy...’

Draco stood back, looking uncertain.

‘Come here, Draco,’ Madam Pomfrey ordered. Draco obeyed, his eyes on the floor.

‘Well,’ said Madam Pomfrey, scrutinizing him. ‘You seem all right. Some bruises and

a few cuts; those are easy to mend. In the meantime, eat this.' She broke a piece of chocolate from a huge bar and put it in Draco's hand. He put the chocolate in his mouth and ate it. She brought her attention back to Harry.

'What happened to his leg?' she asked.

'Vol-Voldemort,' said Susan. 'He tried to get his snake to bite Harry but...but I killed the snake, so he used a Cutting Spell instead.'

'You killed the snake?' said Bill, impressed, and Susan nodded. She looked wretched and sad and worn out. She sat next to Harry's bed, but didn't touch him.

As Madam Pomfrey began to patch Harry's wounds, Luna and Snape began preparations to complete the antidote.

Snape had set the cauldron on the table. From it he removed several flasks of different types of powder.

Luna opened her flask of unfinished antidote. The potion glowed brilliant, opalescent turquoise. Carefully she poured the contents of the flask into the small cauldron.

'Madam Pomfrey,' she said. 'Do you have any Blood Replenishing Draught?'

Pomfrey looked up sharply. 'Of course I do. Why?'

'I'll need it later,' said Luna lightly. She opened the massive *Book of Morgan Le Fey* and began to read.

'Well?' Snape asked, sounding rather impatient.

'I--the recipe is to make a full gallon of the antidote,' she said uncertainly. 'I only have about a pint. I'll have to make adjustments. I need--a moment.'

Ron felt like screaming. A moment!? Even now Hermione was growing paler; livid dark spots were starting to appear on her neck and face. The disease was killing her! Why couldn't they hurry up?

‘A tablespoon of powdered Graphook horn,’ said Luna suddenly.

Snape opened a small flask, pulled a set of metal spoons from his robes, and poured the Graphook powder into one of the spoons.

‘Make sure it’s a level teaspoon,’ Luna instructed. Snape gave her a look, then swept his index finger across the top of the powder in the spoon, leveling it flat. He handed her the spoon.

‘Pour it in slowly,’ she read on, gently tipping the spoon and letting the Graphook powder trickle into the potion. It hissed and bubbled, then glowed a deep, rich purple color.

Luna’s eyes swept over the page of the book; again she seemed to be calculating, reducing the amount of the next ingredient to make it work with the small amount of antidote they had left.

‘One two-inch slice of bezoar,’ Luna read. Snape removed a scaly roll of what looked like dead skin and cut off a small piece of it with a knife he produced from his robes (Ron was beginning to wonder if Snape could carry his entire laboratory in the robes).

‘Let it--flutter into the potion,’ said Luna, sounding nervous. Snape handed her the bezoar, which Luna then held above the cauldron and released it. It floated gently down into the liquid, like a piece of stray parchment on a breeze. The potion hissed and bubbled again, turning shocking magenta.

‘One teaspoon ground gingerroot,’ said Luna, her eyes back on the book.

Snape poured the quantity of the pale yellow ginger into one of the metal spoons. ‘Level?’ he asked, eyebrows raised.

Luna nodded; Snape swept his finger over the powder and smoothed it and handed it to her.

‘Three taps into the potion,’ said Luna. She held the spoon over the cauldron and gave it three gentle taps. The powdered ginger plopped into the potion, which let out a loud, shrieking whistle.

‘What the--’ Ron began. Madam Pomfrey had jumped out of her seat.

‘It’s supposed to do that,’ said Luna quickly. ‘Uh, now, Professor Sprout, the--the Mandrake draught. One--one tablespoon.’

Snape made to hand his spoons to Professor Sprout, who had set her beaker down on the table. She took the spoons, selected the tablespoon, and dipped it into the beaker filled with putrid green liquid. She handed the spoonful of draught to Luna.

‘Drizzle it into the potion,’ read Luna. ‘Count to--count to ten.’

Luna held the spoonful of Mandrake draught above the cauldron and began to count, tipping the spoon just slightly. The draught drizzled into the cauldron in a thin line of dark green. The potion began to swirl and again changed color, this time back to brilliant turquoise.

‘N-Neville,’ Luna said, looking up. ‘I--I need a tablespoon of stinksap and four crushed leaves.’

Neville nodded. ‘Uh, maybe I should just--go over here,’ he said, pulling out his wand and a small flask and hoisting his *mimulus mimbletonia* under his arm. Ron groaned inwardly. Not only was this potion taking way too long to finish, but now Neville was about to make the whole hospital wing smell like manure.

Neville took a deep breath and set down the plant. With a swift motion he poked one of the huge boils on it and immediately jets of stinksap burst from the plant, spraying him (he had, however, ducked in time to avoid getting a faceful). Quickly he raised his flask and held it up to one of the jets of stinksap, catching quite a lot of it. The smell was overwhelming, and Ron immediately started to feel queasy. Tonks and Bill, who were standing back from the beds, covered their faces with their robe sleeves. Malfoy and Susan screwed up their faces in disgust. Madam Pomfrey coughed and wrinkled her nose.

Neville quickly grabbed four leaves from the plant, earning him another squirt of stinksap in the chest, where it stained his shirt, then walked over to Luna.

‘Sorry--sorry I s-smell so bad,’ he muttered, looking at Luna and blushing furiously. Sprout smiled at him and held out the tablespoon. He poured the flask of stinksap into the spoon, slopping more of it onto the floor, but at last he filled the spoon. Neville then handed Sprout the four leaves. He pointed his wand at himself and muttered ‘*Scourgify*’ and he was clean of the stinksap.

‘Dump the stinksap in quickly,’ read Luna, ‘and then crush the leaves one by one and let the pieces fall into the potion.’ Sprout handed the spoon to Luna, who flipped the stinksap-filled spoon over. The nasty, muddy-looking liquid plopped into the cauldron. Nothing happened. Then Luna took one of the leaves, crushed it in her hand, and let the pieces sprinkle gently into the cauldron. The liquid turned slightly darker blue. She repeated the process with the other three leaves; with each addition the liquid turned still darker blue.

‘That’s it,’ said Luna. ‘I mean, that’s all the--the external ingredients.’

‘What now?’ Neville asked.

‘I wash my hands,’ said Luna, standing up. She walked briskly over to the sink and ran the tap over her dirty hands. She scrubbed them with soap, grimacing as the soap touched the cuts on her palms, then patted them dry. She returned to the cauldron.

‘Professor Snape,’ she said calmly, ‘I--I need to borrow your knife.’

Snape nodded, handing her his small pocketknife.

‘What’s that for?’ Neville asked.

It was Draco who answered. ‘The potion requires the blood of the descendant,’ he said, in an oddly distant voice. He was staring alternately at Luna and the cauldron, his face a mask of awe.

‘Blood?’ said Neville, sounding horrified. ‘But--’

‘Quiet, Longbottom!’ Snape hissed. Neville swallowed and bit his lip.

‘It’s all right, Neville,’ said Luna, looking at him. She held the knife in her right hand. He nodded timidly.

Luna held up her left hand where the puckered scar tissue of the previous cut seemed to glow against the whiteness of her skin. She closed her eyes, opened her mouth and spoke, but the voice that issued from her lips was clear, loud and terrifying.

‘Fata Morgana, regina aeterna, source of life and death, the beginning and the end, good and evil, with my blood I consecrate the Draught of Life...Nectare vitale...nectare vitale...’

Ron stared, unblinking, his jaw slack, as Luna, eyes wide open now, raised the knife and slashed the blade across her left palm, re-opening the wound.

She winced, but then made a fist with her left hand. Blood began to trickle out of it. Luna began to chant as one, two, three, half a dozen, a dozen drops of blood fell into the cauldron. *‘Nectare vitale...’* The liquid was changing color again, turning paler, paler blue. The potion was hissing loudly and began to whistle. But it was unlike any whistling Ron had ever heard. It was more like...singing. Eerie, high pitched, beautiful, wordless singing. The potion began to swirl and suddenly pearlescent fog began to pour from the cauldron, filling the room. Golden light poured rose from the potion and enveloped Luna, who was still chanting under her breath. The potion’s scent enveloped Ron’s nostrils; it was a scent so powerful and intoxicating and perfect that years from that moment Ron would be unable to put it into words. Like water, perhaps--the purest water imaginable. Like life itself.

Luna continued to stand over the cauldron, drops of her blood mixing with the potion, but now she was swaying. Her chanting mingled with the sounds of the singing coming from the cauldron. Her eyes rolled back and the brilliant light surrounding her became silver-white. The sounds reached a fever pitch, so high as to be almost unbearable. Ron blinked and felt tears on his face.

In the next instant, everything stopped. Luna’s chanting vanished, the singing, the fog, the swirling, the light, all of it evaporated in a flash. Luna gave out a great, heaving sigh and began to slump to the floor.

‘Luna!’ Neville cried, catching her. Her hand was still bleeding, and her face was deathly pale.

‘Madam Pomfrey!’ Neville cried.

‘Get her over here, Longbottom,’ Madam Pomfrey snapped. Neville scooped up Luna and carried her over to an unoccupied bed.

‘Hold her up,’ said Pomfrey, and Neville lifted Luna into his arms and held her head still as Pomfrey gently poured some Blood Replenishing Draught into the blonde girl’s mouth. Reflexively, Luna swallowed, and color returned to her cheeks at once, and she opened her eyes.

‘Luna,’ Neville said tentatively. ‘Are you okay?’

She blinked and looked at him for a long moment, and then at Madam Pomfrey.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I’m fine. But now I must destroy the book--’

‘Are you mad, girl?’ Pomfrey hissed. ‘You’re not getting out of this bed until you’ve rested and I’ve cleaned you up properly.’

‘Please, Madam Pomfrey, the book has to be destroyed--’ Luna begged.

‘It can wait,’ said Pomfrey firmly.

‘Luna, please,’ Neville begged.

‘I have to destroy it,’ said Luna, and her eyes filled with tears.

‘I know,’ Neville said, nodding. ‘But...not right now.’

They looked at one another for a long moment, and she nodded. Neville stepped back as Pomfrey began to examine Luna over.

Ron blinked, coming to his senses. He wasn't sure just what had happened, but suddenly all he cared about was pouring that potion down Hermione's throat.

'Is--is the potion--can we use it?' Ron asked. He looked down at Hermione, who was now ashen-faced. Her eyelids were fluttering and she had begun to moan.

'In a minute, Weasley!' Madam Pomfrey snapped. 'Can't you see this girl is-- '

'It's ready,' Luna murmured. 'It's ready. You should all take it. Just a few drops each. But you have to do it now--it won't stay good for very long.' She turned her head toward Hermione, then to Harry and Lupin. Susan moved next to Harry's bed.

'William, fetch some flasks,' she continued. Bill nodded and raced into Madam Pomfrey's office, returning with four glass flasks. She turned to Ron, Susan and Tonks. 'Divide the potion up equally. Don't spill it.'

Snape stood; Madam Pomfrey handed him a ladle. 'I'll do it,' said Snape firmly. He dipped the ladle in the gently gurgling potion, which was clear but still glowing as though with opals. He began to portion out the liquid into the flasks, eyeing them carefully and taking his time. Ron began to tap his foot impatiently, but Snape gave him a murderous look and he immediately stopped.

After what seemed like ages Snape emptied the cauldron of its contents. Ron, Susan, Bill and Tonks each picked up a flask. Ron started to turn toward Hermione when Snape ordered 'Stop!'

Ron and Tonks repressed the urge to groan aloud and turned to him. 'Compare your flasks,' Snape ordered. Ron, Tonks, Bill and Susan held up their flasks next to each other. For almost a minute Snape stared at the four flasks. Ron's brain was screaming in impatience.

'Good,' said Snape. 'Take these spoons, and go to.'

Ron grabbed a wooden spoon from Snape and turned away. He knelt down beside Hermione's bed. 'A little help,' he called.

'I'll-I'll do it,' said Draco, shuffling toward Hermione. Ron glared at him.

'You?'

'Yeah,' said Draco, a challenge in his voice. 'I think...I think I owe it to her, don't you?'

‘You?’ Ron snarled. ‘Owe something to a...a...’

‘Mudblood?’ Draco said softly.

Ron took two menacing steps toward Draco.

‘Don’t you call her that,’ said Ron. ‘Ever.’

Draco’s grey eyes met Ron’s blue ones unflinchingly. ‘Fine. Now get out of my way so I can help you give her the antidote.’

Under other circumstances Ron might have regarded Draco suspiciously for several minutes, but at that moment Ron only cared about the potion down Hermione’s throat. If that meant having Draco Malfoy helping him, so be it.

‘Put three drops on the spoons,’ Luna called, as Pomfrey cleaned one of the lacerations on her arm.

‘Fine,’ said Ron, and Draco knelt down beside Hermione’s bed as Ron stood up.

‘Lift her up,’ Ron ordered. ‘Gently.’

Draco shot Ron a dirty look but then turned to Hermione. He slid his left arm under Hermione’s shoulders and wrapped his right arm around her and lifted her up into a sitting position. Her head lolled senselessly to one side.

‘Mind her head,’ Ron snapped. Malfoy shifted slightly and put a hand behind Hermione’s skull. He tilted her head back slightly.

‘That’s good,’ said Ron, and he sat down on the bed gently, holding the flask of potion steady. ‘I’m going to give her the potion.’

Draco nodded, and Ron gently moved Hermione’s mouth open. He tilted the flask and slowly poured three drops of it onto the spoon; he placed the spoon against Hermione’s lips and tilted the spoon, and the drops of brilliant, viscous liquid slid into her mouth.

She gave a little cough.

Ron took his free hand and rubbed small circles on Hermione's throat. She began to swallow it.

It seemed to take an eternity but soon the spoon was empty; Ron gave it a very gentle shake, determined to get the very last drop.

Draco started to set Hermione back down, but Ron intervened.

'I've got her,' he said. 'Hold this and back off.' He thrust the flask of potion and the spoon in Draco's hands.

'Ronald,' said Luna, 'you and Malfoy should take some, too.'

'Right,' said Ron. He placed Hermione carefully back on the bed as Draco poured a dose of the potion into the spoon and took it. He handed the flask and spoon to Ron, who glared at him before measuring out a dose for himself and drinking it down.

It tasted sweet and pure. Like air and water and honey and earth. It was perhaps the only good tasting potion Ron had ever taken.

Susan and Ginny were just finishing giving Harry the last bit of potion, and Neville and Tonks attended Lupin, all before taking doses of the potion themselves.

'Let's distribute this among the other patients,' Pomfrey said sharply. Ron didn't want to leave Hermione's side, but as he started to get up he saw Draco pick up the potion and the spoon again, and make his way to the beds of other sleeping students and Aurors.

'Weasley, help me,' he snapped.

Ron glowered at him, but he nodded and got up, kissing Hermione's hand. Color had returned to her face, and the black spots on her skin seemed to be fading a little. Or perhaps it was just Ron's imagination, and his exhaustion, playing mental tricks on him. But she did not wake up.

Ron looked down at Hermione, brushing hair from her face. Please be okay, he

thought desperately. Don't leave me.

'Weasley,' Draco repeated.

'I'm coming,' Ron hissed.

'She'll be okay, Ronald,' said Luna, sounding exhausted now. 'We all will. The potion takes time to work.' She looked up at him with her huge eyes, and Ron believed her.

'Okay,' he said. He joined Malfoy and they began to distribute the rest of the potion. Ron said nothing to the other boy, and Malfoy's face betrayed nothing, but for a set to his jaw.

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An hour later, Ron and Draco managed to dole out Luna's healing potion to the rest of the students and Aurors in hospital beds. Tonks had fallen asleep in her chair perched next to Lupin's bed; her arm was draped across his waist and her head was next to his shoulder. Susan had gone with Professor Sprout back to Hufflepuff, on strict orders from Madam Pomfrey to rest; Susan was also given a dose of Dreamless Sleep Draught.

Ron, for his part, refused to leave Hermione's bedside. Even though it was now well past dawn and light streamed into the room, even though he was exhausted, he was determined to be with Hermione when she finally woke up. Both Luna and Pomfrey had warned Ron that this could be hours or even days--the poison in Hermione's bloodstream was powerful and it would take time for the antidote to completely eradicate it. Ron didn't care. He'd miss exams, he'd skive off lessons, but he would not leave Hermione's side.

Or Harry's. Harry's color had returned since being given the antidote, and his scar no longer glowed angry red. But he wouldn't wake, either. Madam Pomfrey could only speculate that the mental battle with Voldemort, coupled with Harry's physical injuries, took a tremendous toll on him. It could be days, too, before Harry woke up.

Ron couldn't remember ever feeling so alone, or so helpless. All he could do was wait. It was driving him mad.

As the day wore on, Ron slept a bit; his absolute exhaustion wouldn't allow him to keep his eyes open, and the moment he sat down in the chair next to Hermione and put his head down next to her, he dozed off. But his dreams were unsettled. Over and over again he saw himself killing Dolohov, interspersed with visions of Hermione, looking beautiful and smiling at him. It was altogether more disturbing than any straightforward nightmare. Ron didn't want the happy sight of his girl being mixed up with images of the death he had caused. Needless to say, his sleep was fitful, but he refused Madam Pomfrey's offer of Dreamless Sleep Draught.

Bill came in at lunchtime, clean and scrubbed and his hair neatly pulled back, and begged Ron to eat something; Ron stubbornly refused, and Bill's solution was to arrange for Dobby to bring Ron a bit of lunch on a tray. When the food arrived, Ron ate greedily, and Bill smiled and shook his head.

'At least one thing's still normal around here,' he said. 'Your appetite.'

'Yeah, well,' said Ron, swallowing a bite of roast beef sandwich and downing a glass of iced pumpkin juice in one, 'fighting Death Eaters is exhausting work.'

Ron felt slightly better for the food, but his mood grew darker the longer Hermione and Harry both remained unconscious.

He was also a bit disturbed when, in the late afternoon, he noticed that Susan hadn't yet been by to visit Harry. Perhaps Susan's family had come to the school without Ron being aware of it, and was visiting with her; perhaps she had even been given permission to visit her aunt in hospital (if she was still in there). Ron decided not to let Susan's absence bother him too much.

Draco Malfoy had left that morning, and Ron hadn't seen him since. He had no idea what would happen to the other boy. Surely he was a candidate for expulsion, and Ron would not have minded this in the least. However much Draco might have done

right in the end, Ron wasn't sure that could make up for over six years of misery he had caused. Draco's actions had led to a lot of suffering, and not just of the usual schoolyard variety. Ron would never forget how beaten Luna had looked when they'd found her cowering in the closet, and that was Draco's fault, as much as any of the other Death Eaters.

Still, that nagging hint of pity in the back of Ron's brain wouldn't entirely let go. Draco HAD, after all, lost his mother, at the hands of his own father, and that same father had only too eagerly cast his own son aside in order to please Voldemort. All in all, Ron thought, the Malfoys are a bloody sick family.

It was early evening and Ron was feeling sleepy again. Remus Lupin had been moved to St. Mungo's; Pomfrey was able to determine that he was out of danger but would be best served by the healers there, as she had far too many patients to devote proper attention to the needs of a werewolf. Professor Snape reluctantly agreed, at her insistence, to accompany Lupin and Tonks, so that he could give instructions to the healers on brewing a proper Wolfsbane Potion.

Hermione and Harry both remained as they were. Resolutely unconscious. Now and again, Hermione made a kind of weak sighing noise, and Ron would jump out of his chair and say her name, but she didn't wake. Harry stirred not at all, but Pomfrey appeared unconcerned by this. Both Harry and Hermione, she reported, were breathing easily and had steady heartbeats. They would wake up when they were ready.

By mid-evening Ron was feeling distinctly impatient, worried, frazzled and exhausted, and began to pace. Madam Pomfrey put a stop to this at once, ordering him to be still or get out. He sat down again.

An hour passed, and Ron was hungry again, but he didn't want to leave the hospital wing. He was debating whether or not to race to the kitchens and ask Dobby to throw something together for him when Bill, once again, came in.

'Hey,' he said. 'You still haven't left?'

'No,' said Ron, looking at Hermione and clutching her small hand in his. 'I told you,

I'm not leaving--'

'--until they wake up,' said Bill. 'Well, then, you wouldn't have heard.'

'Heard what?'

'Dumbledore,' said Bill. 'He's back.'

Ron's head snapped up.

'What?' he said incredulously. 'Dumbledore? You're kidding.'

'Not kidding,' said Bill. 'He's completely cured, too. Some healer named Smethwyk was responsible. Anyway, my brief tenure as Acting Headmaster is thankfully over.'

Ron blinked. 'Wow,' he said. 'I mean...wow. What--does Dumbledore know what happened?'

'Yes,' said Bill. 'I filled him in on as much as I could. He wasn't too happy with me, taking you to the Riddle House, but he did mention that at least now, we have a better idea of how Voldemort plans to get to Harry.'

Ron looked at Bill blankly for a moment, and then he remembered. 'By possessing him.'

'Something like that,' said Bill. 'Although Dumbledore says it's a lot more complicated than, in his words, "mere possession".'

‘What did he mean by that?’ said Ron, confused.

‘I don’t know,’ said Bill. ‘You know Dumbledore; he talks in riddles half the time. Anyway, the reason I came here was to tell you that he wants to see you.’

‘Dumbledore?’ said Ron.

‘No, the Giant Squid,’ said Bill, rolling his eyes. ‘Yes, Dumbledore.’

‘Wants to see...me?’ said Ron. ‘Why?’

‘He didn’t tell me that, little brother,’ said Bill. ‘Only that he asked that you come to him now.’

‘But...I don’t want to leave Hermione,’ Ron protested. ‘What if she wakes up before I’m gone--’

‘She won’t,’ said Bill. ‘Luna told me that potion will take at least a full twenty-four hours to work, if not longer.’

‘Are you sure?’ said Ron.

‘I’m inclined to believe Luna at this point, aren’t you?’ said Bill wryly.

‘Yeah, right,’ said Ron, smiling. ‘Uh, okay. So...I’ll just...go see Dumbledore, I guess.’ He stood.

‘You do that, little brother,’ said Bill, and then he looked at Ron. ‘Good god. Are you taller than me now?’

Ron gazed at Bill for a moment, and then it hit him. It was hardly noticeable, but Ron was indeed looking in a slight downward direction at Bill.

‘I guess I am,’ said Ron, with a hint of smugness. ‘Not so little, am I?’

Bill gave Ron an affectionate shrug. ‘You’ll always be Little Ronnie to me, you brat. Now get out of here and go talk to Dumbledore. I have to talk with Madam Pomfrey about a couple of things.’

‘Yeah, okay,’ said Ron. He started out of the hospital wing. Halfway to the door, he turned. ‘Bill?’

‘What?’

Ron suddenly didn’t know what to say, so instead, he crossed the room and pulled Bill, a bit roughly, into a hug. It was over before it started.

‘What was that?’ said Bill, grinning.

Ron blushed and looked at his shoes. ‘I’m just...you know, glad you’re okay.’

‘I’m glad you’re okay, too,’ said Bill, and for a moment, they just looked at one another.

Bill broke the silence. 'Well, get out of here,' he said, grinning again. 'Don't keep the Headmaster waiting.'

'Right!' said Ron, and he started back out of the hospital wing, when Bill called out to him again.

'What?' Ron asked.

'You look like shit,' Bill said. 'Go have a shave, would you?'

Ron threw Bill a very rude hand gesture. They both laughed. Ron left the hospital wing, and made his way to Dumbledore's office.

### *Chapter Thirty-Seven: Second Sight*

Ron approached Dumbledore's office with more than a little trepidation. He tried to think back on a time since he'd come to Hogwarts that he'd ever spent a moment alone with the Headmaster in his office, and he couldn't think of one. The thought of seeing Dumbledore one-on-one made Ron nervous. Perhaps because, at least this year, Dumbledore always seemed to be the bearer of incredibly sad or otherwise bad news. What if what he wanted to talk about was something horrible about Harry, or Hermione? Or worse, both of them?

Ron reached the entrance of Dumbledore's office and only then realized he had no clue what the password might be. He remembered Harry telling him that Dumbledore favored sweets of all sorts. Nervously, Ron stepped inside the outstretched wings of the stone phoenix and was about to name a sweet, when the statue gave a lurch and began to spin. Ron nearly stumbled as stone steps rose up and twisted upward. He righted himself and began to climb. His feet felt like lead.

Once at the door, his apprehension turned into outright fear. Dumbledore was going to tell him something dreadful. He could feel it in his bones. Something awful about Harry. Harry had lost his mind when he'd fought off Voldemort, and would spend the rest of his life in St. Mungo's with Neville's parents. The antidote hadn't worked for Hermione. Lupin was dead.

Get a grip, Weasley, he thought. It might not be that at all.

And yet Ron couldn't shake the feeling, in his heart, in his very pores, that he was going to learn something that he had no desire to learn.

He knocked on the door.

'Come in, Mr. Weasley,' Dumbledore called. His voice sounded reedier than ever. Ron pushed open the door.

Dumbledore was sitting behind his desk, with his phoenix, Fawkes, on his perch at his side; the Headmaster was absently stroking the bird's feathers. He looked ancient and withered; he'd lost a significant amount of weight as a result of his time in hospital, and his magnificent purple robes hung off his frame. Ron swallowed.

'Please, come in, Ron,' said Dumbledore kindly. 'Take a seat.'

'Yes, sir,' said Ron, and he sat in the chair opposite Dumbledore. 'You...wanted to see me, sir?'

'Yes,' said Dumbledore slowly. 'I've spoken at length with your brother, and I know some of what occurred at the Riddle House last night. Needless to say I am not delighted to know that a teacher allowed six students to accompany him into the lair of Voldemort.'

'That wasn't Bill's fault,' said Ron quickly.

'Not entirely, no,' said Dumbledore. 'Harry's friends are as stubborn as he is.'

‘Yes, sir,’ said Ron, looking down at his hands.

‘Mr. Weasley, do you have any idea why I called you up here tonight?’ said Dumbledore.

‘No, sir,’ said Ron.

‘I want to know exactly what happened at the Riddle House last night,’ said Dumbledore. ‘Between Harry and Voldemort. Your brother was unable to give me any details on that particular event.’

‘Oh,’ said Ron, and he bit his lip. He was so tired. He really didn’t want to talk about this. ‘Do I...have to, sir?’

‘You don’t “have” to do anything, Ron,’ said Dumbledore. ‘But as Miss Granger is indisposed at the moment, and Mr. Longbottom, Miss Lovegood, and Miss Bones is in the company of their families, I’m afraid you are the only one available who can fill me in.’

‘Right,’ said Ron reluctantly. ‘Uh, well...see, we were trying to get out of the house. There was this crash downstairs and me, Susan and Hermione all ran into the living room and we saw Harry and Vol-Voldemort fighting. And...and Voldemort aimed the Killing Curse at Susan but Harry, he threw up a Shield Charm to block it, only...only this weird thing happened.’

‘What weird thing?’ said Dumbledore.

‘Well, uh, the beams of light collided and they turned into one gold beam and then it started to split off and make this...this web, or something,’ said Ron, fidgeting with his hands. ‘Hermione called it something. *Priori...priori...*’

*Priori Incantatem?*’ Dumbledore said gently.

‘Yeah, that,’ said Ron. ‘And then all these grey figures--they looked like ghosts--started coming out of Voldemort’s wand, and...and I saw Harry’s parents. And he...he smiled at them. Right in the middle of the bloody--er, uh, the battle, Harry smiled at his mum and dad. Well, I mean, the ghosts of his mum and dad. Not his real mum and dad. But you knew that.’

‘Yes, I knew that,’ said Dumbledore, smiling kindly. Ron blushed. He felt ridiculous and hurried along, just to get it over with.

‘So, anyway, I guess Harry kept that whole Priori thing going and Hermione yelled at him to break the connection and...and we all got ready and he did it--he sort of jerked his wand away and the web thing disappeared and we all blasted Voldemort with some spells--I don’t remember what we used--and we knocked him down. And Harry went over and said he had to finish it...and...and then he sort of screamed and grabbed his scar.’

‘Ah,’ said Dumbledore, as though none of this surprised him at all. Ron swallowed again--his throat was quite dry--and continued.

‘So Harry turned back to us and he started talking, only it wasn’t his voice, it was Voldemort’s, and his eyes--Harry’s eyes, I mean--were all red, and he was going to hex us and...and I jumped in front of the girls and I dunno, I think I said, ‘It’s me,’ or something...and then Harry screamed again and...and Voldemort screamed. And they both fell, and then Voldemort Disapparated.’

A long silence greeted the end of Ron’s recitation. He wracked his brain for anything he might have left out, but he was so exhausted that he doubted it did much good. At last Dumbledore gave a sigh and spoke.

‘Thank you for that, Mr. Weasley,’ he said. ‘That explains...a lot.’

‘It does?’ said Ron. ‘I...I don’t understand, sir.’

‘Has Harry told you about the Prophecy, Ron?’ said Dumbledore.

‘Yes, sir,’ said Ron heavily. ‘I know about that.’

‘Then you know that sooner or later, Harry will face Voldemort again,’ said Dumbledore. ‘And if Harry escapes and Voldemort survives, Harry will have to face Voldemort yet again, and again and again until one of them...is dead.’

Ron groaned and put his head in his hands for a moment, then looked up. ‘That’s not fair. Why...why Harry? Why?’

‘I can’t explain why, Ron,’ said Dumbledore sadly. ‘And you are right. It is unfair. For a sixteen year old boy to hold the fate of our world in his hands, to be called upon to defeat a man most fully qualified wizards would quail to face. But it is Harry’s destiny.’

‘Yeah,’ said Ron dully. ‘I know.’

‘You have to understand, Ron,’ said Dumbledore. ‘Harry cannot do this alone. The events of last night proved it.’

‘Yeah?’ said Ron. ‘All I saw was that it proved four of us throwing jinxes at him didn’t do sh--er, squat.’

‘The final reckoning of Harry and Voldemort will not simply come down to a duel of wands,’ said Dumbledore. ‘You saw, first-hand, Voldemort attempt to possess Harry’s mind. Not through the Imperius Curse, but directly. He tried to use his connection with Harry to get Harry to hurt you, and the girls. Voldemort is nothing if not ruthless. If he cannot destroy Harry through a Killing Curse, he will destroy him in a crueler, more insidious way--through his friends.’

Ron shuddered. 'Voldemort...when we were trapped, he said...he said he was going to kill us, and...and make Harry watch. He said that...this would make Harry suffer more.'

'Yes, that does rather sound like something Voldemort would say,' said Dumbledore grimly. 'And do. And he is right--it would cause Harry more suffering. That is why Voldemort tried to take over Harry's mind and force him to kill you, and Miss Bones and Miss Granger. What better way to destroy his worst enemy, than to make him the murderer of the people he loves most?'

Ron closed his eyes, then opened them. 'That's sick.'

'Yes, it is,' said Dumbledore sadly. 'But you see, Mr. Weasley, in the end, Harry fought back. And he has you to thank for it.'

'Me?' said Ron, flabbergasted. 'What do you mean?'

'Did you not say to Harry, "It's me", when he aimed his wand at you?'

'Uh, well, yeah,' said Ron uncertainly. 'It just sort of came out...I mean, I was pretty scared.'

'Of course you were,' said Dumbledore. 'Regardless, you were able to get through to Harry, in the midst of being controlled by the most powerful Dark wizard in a century. You were able to penetrate Voldemort's hold on Harry's mind.'

Ron was stunned. 'What are you saying?'

'Did Harry tell you about the part of the Prophecy that says he has a power the Dark Lord knows not?' said Dumbledore.

‘Yeah, uh, he mentioned that,’ said Ron.

‘Can you not guess what that power might be?’ said Dumbledore gently.

Ron considered for a moment, but he was simply flummoxed, and he shook his head.

‘Love, Mr. Weasley,’ said Dumbledore. ‘A force more powerful, more beautiful and more terrible than any living thing. More powerful than death, more powerful even than hate. It is the one thing Voldemort lacks, the one thing he cannot understand. It was love that saved Harry, and you and the girls, last night. Voldemort cannot possess Harry’s mind when his heart is full of love; the very power of it hurts him and he cannot hold onto his control. You managed to penetrate Voldemort’s grip on Harry’s mind when you spoke to him, because you reached out to his heart, and Harry heard you.’

Ron stared at the Headmaster; his mind was spinning.

‘What...what does that mean?’ he said, utterly confused.

‘It means,’ said Dumbledore, ‘that in the end, love is the force that will destroy Voldemort, and save us all.’

Ron’s shoulders sagged. ‘I don’t...I don’t understand.’

‘You will,’ said Dumbledore, and Ron bit back a scowl. He HATED when people said that to him.

‘Okay,’ he mumbled. ‘Um, can I...go now?’

‘Not just yet,’ said Dumbledore. ‘There is one other thing I have to ask.’

‘Yes, sir?’

‘In speaking with your brother, and in putting together all the events of the past several weeks, I have come to a particular conclusion about you,’ Dumbledore said.

‘Oh,’ said Ron, still confused, but for a whole new reason. ‘Uh, what’s that?’

‘Is it not true, Mr. Weasley, that you experienced quite a few visions last summer?’

Ron gulped. ‘Uh...’

Why on EARTH would Dumbledore bring THAT up? Ron had nearly forgotten about those visions. He had WANTED to forget them, because they were so horrible.

‘You can tell me, Ron,’ said Dumbledore gently.

‘Well,’ said Ron, relenting, ‘yeah. I mean, yes, sir.’

‘And I understand from your brother that you have long had suspicions about the student known as Edward Carmichael,’ said Dumbledore.

‘Yeah, I did,’ said Ron reluctantly, ‘but, that was just ‘cause he was scamming on, I mean, uh, flirting with Hermione.’

‘Is that all?’ said Dumbledore.

‘Well, no,’ Ron admitted. ‘I mean, that was a big part of it but...I dunno. He always struck me as...off.’

‘Tell me,’ said Dumbledore. ‘Did you have any suspicions at all that Eddie Carmichael was in fact Bellatrix Lestrange?’

Ron swallowed. ‘No, sir.’

Dumbledore gave him a look.

Ron groaned. ‘Look, I...okay. I didn’t KNOW. I didn’t. I just...I had a few dreams about Eddie. Not ABOUT Eddie but Eddie was in them. Only he looked really evil and he had this weird laugh and then...he would sort of disappear and this dark-haired witch would show up in his place, only she had the same kind of laugh. But I didn’t KNOW anything.’

‘And what of the book?’ said Dumbledore. ‘I was at least able to learn from Miss Lovegood that you seemed to know exactly where to find it in the Riddle House. She claims, in fact, that you heard it.’

Ron shot out of his chair. ‘That’s bloody daft!’ he said, but even as the words left his mouth he panicked. He HAD heard the book...speaking. Whispering. Or at least, he’d heard voices.

Shit, he thought. Dumbledore isn’t about to tell me Harry’s mad. He’s about to tell me I’M the one who’s mad.

‘Is it daft, Mr. Weasley?’ said Dumbledore. ‘Did you, by any chance, dream about that room in the Riddle House?’

Ron ran a hand through his hair. ‘Yes,’ he said, feeling angry and embarrassed and confused. ‘Yeah, okay? Look...what’s this all about, anyway?’

‘Please, Mr. Weasley, sit down,’ said Dumbledore gesturing to the chair opposite his desk.

Ron flopped heavily into the chair; all attempts at decorum for the Headmaster’s sake went out the window.

‘Tell me about the dream, of the book,’ said Dumbledore.

‘I don’t remember all of it,’ said Ron, a bit petulantly. ‘Just...there was this big room full of book shelves and the book was on this table and there was whispering and somebody or something kept telling me to open the book, so I did. And then Luna told me I shouldn’t have done that.’

‘And is this what happened in reality?’ said Dumbledore.

Ron flushed. ‘Well, uh, yeah. But I didn’t mean to! I...it was weird...I felt all weird and...and foggy or something. Bloody hell.’

He was swearing in front of the Headmaster (repeatedly), but he just didn’t care now. He was just coming to the conclusion that he was, indeed, mad as a hatter.

‘There is something,’ said Dumbledore, ‘that you need to understand about yourself.’

‘Great,’ said Ron. ‘I’ve gone barmy. That’s it, isn’t it? Is that why I’m hearing bloody voices in my head? Now I know how Harry felt in second year--’

‘Peace, Mr. Weasley,’ said Dumbledore, holding up his hands. ‘You have not...gone barmy. If you’d allow me to finish...’

Ron looked up at Dumbledore and sighed. 'Yeah,' he said.

'Mr. Weasley, the brain that attacked you last year,' said Dumbledore. 'It belonged to a very famous witch. A Seer.'

Ron's eyes widened, but he suddenly couldn't speak.

'True Seers are exceedingly rare,' Dumbledore went on. 'You may not realize this, but Sybill Trelawney, I'm afraid, lacks a true Seer's gift.'

'No kidding,' Ron said, laughing nervously. 'I mean, uh, I sorta figured that.'

'But, as I said, true Seers are very rare,' Dumbledore went on. 'When a true Seer dies the Ministry--with the consent of the Seer's surviving family--will take the brain of that Seer and study it, in the hopes of learning more about how a Seer's mind works, how she came to get the gift. I say "she" because most Seers in recorded history have been women. There is a reason for the old saying, "a woman's intuition." Women, by and large, are more intuitive than men; their brains are more likely to be open to extra-sensory experience. As such, this makes them more likely to possess second sight. You know what second sight is?'

'That's...seeing the future, right?' said Ron, clenching his fists.

'Yes,' said Dumbledore, and he looked at Ron for a long moment.

'What...what does all this have to do with me?' he asked nervously.

'Ron, you had many visions and dreams this past year, and at least a few of those dreams became a reality, more or less,' said Dumbledore slowly. 'Am I correct?'

‘More or less,’ said Ron, looking down at his hands. ‘But...but they were so vague. It doesn’t mean anything.’

‘I think it does mean something,’ said Dumbledore. ‘It means something quite significant.’

‘No!’ said Ron, leaping up, not wanting to believe it. ‘This is...this is crazy. I’m not the one who has messed up dreams that come true. That’s Harry! Remember? All those dreams he had about Voldemort. About my dad last year, and the snake! And...and he’s had some other ones, too...I can’t think of any others at the moment but he has! I know he has! And those visions he gets--’

‘Ron, when that brain attacked you,’ Dumbledore interrupted, ‘it left behind a mark, and not just on your arms. It triggered something in you that has in fact been there all along. Harry has dreams and visions, yes, but he was not born with that gift, or curse, as it were. It was bestowed upon him when Voldemort cursed him as a baby, and more often than not, Harry’s dreams and visions relate mainly to him and those closest to him. And his dreams, as often as not, relate to events that happen in the present, not the future. You had dreams about a woman you barely knew, about a book you’d never seen. Your visions reach well past your own circle of influence and knowledge.’

‘No,’ Ron said desperately. ‘No. It’s not true. I am NOT--’

‘A Seer?’ said Dumbledore, and Ron felt his heart leap into his throat. He couldn’t speak; his tongue felt thick.

‘Sit,’ Dumbledore said, gesturing again to the chair. Ron sank into it.

‘You are not a Seer,’ said Dumbledore slowly, and Ron let out a huge sigh of relief.

‘Thank Merlin,’ said Ron, not even wanting to contemplate it.

‘Not yet,’ said Dumbledore.

‘Shit,’ said Ron, without thinking, but Dumbledore didn’t hear him, or if he did, he pretended not to notice.

‘Even a true Seer must hone his or her gifts,’ said Dumbledore. ‘Most do not know they are Seers, in fact, until there is some major event that alerts them to the gift. It is possible that there are any number of Seers who never truly realize their gift at all. And it may be that you are not a true Seer, but have only moderate abilities in that regard; I cannot say. But you were born with at least some ability. The only way to really determine whether you have the true gift at all is through careful study and practice.’

Ron gaped at Dumbledore, horrified. ‘I don’t want to--I don’t--look, I GAVE UP Divination because it’s rubbish. Because it IS rubbish! Harry says so, Hermione says so, McGonagall says so--even you admit Trelawney is half-mad!’

‘Professor Trelawney, Ron,’ said Dumbledore. ‘And while I admit that this particular branch of magic is very unpredictable, it nonetheless exists.’

Ron groaned and put his head in his hands again. ‘Fine. It exists. But I’m telling you, I’m NOT a bloody--er, I’m not a Seer. No way.’

‘You could be right,’ said Dumbledore lightly. ‘But I want you to explore the possibility, nonetheless.’

‘What?’ said Ron, horrified.

‘Ron, if you do possess true second sight, do you have any idea how helpful that could be to Harry?’ said Dumbledore. ‘I understand that it must be difficult for you, but I am asking you, as a student in my charge, as a prefect, but most of all, as a friend to Harry, to look into this. This war will not be won with wands alone. The very best efforts of our hearts and minds will also be needed.’

Ron closed his eyes. He just couldn't believe it. It was impossible. Nobody in his family was a Seer. Not that he knew of anyway. How could this be? It was ridiculous!

And yet here was the Headmaster, arguing that Ron might in fact have such a "gift" and that it could be helpful to Harry. And that was what it came down to, in the end. Helping Harry. Because he couldn't beat Voldemort on his own.

'Fine,' said Ron dully. 'I'll...I'll do it. I'll look into it.'

'Good,' said Dumbledore.

'What do I have to do?' said Ron.

'The first thing you must do is keep a dream journal,' said Dumbledore. 'You should be accustomed to this; I believe Professor Trelawney had you use one.'

'Yeah,' said Ron, 'but I always just made stuff up.'

Dumbledore chuckled. 'Yes, well, you wouldn't have been the first. But, in all seriousness, Ron, I must ask you to revisit this task, and be serious about it. Your dreams are vague to you only because you put them out of your mind when you awaken--like so many of us. But dreams can tell us many things.'

'Okay,' said Ron. 'Okay. I'll do a dream journal.'

'As regularly as you can,' said Dumbledore. 'Try and write it in when you first get up in the morning, while your dreams are still fresh in your mind. You don't have to worry about every detail--just write down as much as you can.'

‘Then what?’ said Ron, unable to fully believe he was agreeing to this.

‘Read your journal entries,’ said Dumbledore. ‘Look for patterns, or recurring themes. You don’t have to overanalyze. Just...pay attention.’

‘Right,’ said Ron, and then something occurred to him.

‘Sir,’ he said, ‘do I have to...that is, is this a private journal?’

‘Of course,’ said Dumbledore. ‘The only way for you to see any patterns to your dreams is if you can write down everything--you’d hardly be able to do that, I imagine, if you knew someone else would see your journal entries. I’m sure not all dreams are meant to be shared.’

Ron blushed and looked down and tried to shove from his mind all the many sexy dreams he’d had about Hermione.

‘Sir, can...can I go now?’ he asked.

‘Yes, Mr. Weasley, you can go,’ said Dumbledore. He pulled out a piece of parchment and a quill.

Ron stood up, feeling drained, feeling horrible. He didn’t want to believe even the possibility that he might be...that he could have...no, it was ridiculous. But he’d keep the stupid dream journal and write in it anyway, just to appease Dumbledore. Somehow Ron had a feeling Dumbledore would know if he WASN’T writing in it.

Ron turned to go, and then remembered something.

‘Sir?’ he said.

Dumbledore looked up from the parchment on his desk.

‘Yes, Mr. Weasley?’

‘Sorry about, uh, the yelling and the cursing,’ Ron mumbled, looking at his feet.

‘Were you yelling and cursing?’ said Dumbledore, looking perplexed. ‘That’s funny, I don’t recall hearing any of that.’ And then he smiled, and Ron swore he saw the old man’s eyes twinkle.

And Ron grinned in spite of himself, and left the office.

Barking, he thought. The old man is completely barking. And I could be a bloody Seer, which probably means I’M barking, too.

Hermione is going to laugh herself sick when she hears about this.

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Ron returned to the hospital wing and upon entering, nearly fell over. Harry was sitting up in bed; there was a tray next to him with an uneaten meal on it.

‘Harry!’ Ron yelled, and he dashed over to Harry’s bedside and without thinking, threw his arms around the black haired boy’s neck.

‘Ron,’ Harry gasped. ‘Air...can’t breathe...’

Ron quickly let Harry go. 'Sorry,' he said. 'Sorry. Just...shit. I haven't slept and...'

He turned to Hermione's bed, and his heart sank; she was still unconscious and looked like she hadn't moved an inch. Ron moved to sit on Hermione's bed and took her hand.

'She's going to make it, Ron,' said Harry. 'I know it.'

'She looks better,' said Ron hopefully; her color DID look better, and the black spots had indeed faded, so much that they were nearly gone altogether. 'I just wish she'd wake up. Even if she'd just nag me about something.'

'Bite your tongue,' said Harry, grinning.

Ron grinned back. 'I'm glad you're okay, mate.'

'I'm glad to be okay,' said Harry, and he became somber. 'Ron...thanks. For...for what you did back there, at the Riddle House. When Voldemort got inside my head--'

'I know what he tried to do,' said Ron. 'It wasn't you, Harry. And you wouldn't have done it.'

Harry nodded; he didn't look entirely convinced, but he smiled weakly all the same.

'Have you seen Susan?' he asked.

Ron frowned. 'No,' he said. 'But...well. I was just talking to Dumbledore and he said her whole family, practically, is here. So...so maybe they're not letting her out of their sight. You know, being really protective and all.'

‘Yeah,’ said Harry, ‘that’s probably it.’ But he was looking down at his hands, and his voice didn’t sound convinced of this. Ron felt a pang somewhere in his gut. Why HADN’T Susan been around? Ron didn’t expect her to spend every waking minute in the hospital wing, but at the very least she could check on Harry from time to time.

‘Aren’t you going to eat that?’ said Ron, nodding at the food.

‘Not hungry,’ said Harry. ‘Why, do you want it?’ He smirked.

‘No,’ said Ron defensively, and his stomach growled in response.

Harry rolled his eyes. ‘Take it.’

‘No, it’s yours,’ said Ron. ‘You should eat. You need your strength.’

‘Okay, Mum,’ said Harry. ‘Are you filling in for Hermione while she’s sleeping?’

‘Shut it,’ said Ron. ‘You know I’m right.’

‘I also know your stomach sounds like a starving animal,’ said Harry. ‘Let’s split it, okay?’

‘Well, if you insist.’

The two of them ate the meal in silence, but Ron didn’t mind. It had been a long, exhausting week. He had just spent over an hour with the Headmaster learning a few things that he’d rather not have learned. He had no idea how Hermione would react when he told her. Susan was absent for reasons he didn’t know about, and Harry was

stung by it. And someday, he would have to face Voldemort again, and Ron would have to be there.

But for now, they were just two teenage boys, eating a meal and joking around, as they had so many times before, and later on Ron would fetch his chess set, and they would play and Harry would lose spectacularly, as he always did.

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Ron felt lighter than he had in ages. He was walking with Hermione. Or rather, she was walking in front of him, but she was clutching his hand. She was leading him somewhere, but he couldn't see where. They were walking down long, brightly lit corridors. Every now and again she would look back at him and smile shyly.

'Ron,' she said, and then turned and walked on, still clutching his hand.

They came to a familiar tapestry. Hermione smiled again and looked up at him.

'Stand there,' she said. 'And don't move.'

'What is this?' he asked, smiling, arching his eyebrows. Whatever it was, he had a feeling it was going to be really, really good.

'You'll see,' she said. She walked back and forth in front of the tapestry three times. A door appeared.

'There,' she said. 'It's all ready.'

'Cool,' said Ron, grinning.

Hermione smiled and rolled her eyes and took his hand. 'Let's...go in...'

She gripped the doorknob and turned it.

‘Ron,’ she said as she backed through the door. ‘Ron...’

‘RON!’

‘What?!’ Ron’s head jerked up. He blinked. Bright sunlight was pouring into the hospital wing. It was daylight. The following morning. He blinked again.

‘Ron!’ the voice said again. Ron shook his head and looked toward the source of the voice. He felt his heart leap into his throat.

Hermione was sitting up. Her eyes were bright, her skin clear, the black spots on her face and body gone. Her hair was messy and tangled and she had dark circles under her eyes. Her arm was wrapped in a clean white bandage. She was the most beautiful sight Ron had ever seen. And suddenly Ron wondered if he was still dreaming.

‘Her-Hermione?’ he whispered.

‘I was beginning to think you’d never wake up,’ she said, tilting her head and giving him a reproachful look.

Ron felt his eyes burn.

‘Mione,’ he croaked, and he pulled her into a fierce hug, burying his face in her hair, swallowing hard against the lump in his throat.

‘Ron,’ Hermione gasped.

He pulled back from her and looked her squarely in the eyes.

‘I love you,’ he said. ‘Oh...my god I’m so glad you’re awake. Are you okay? How do you feel? You look beautiful...’

He crushed her against him again, and put his arms round her.

‘I love you, too,’ she rasped.

‘Don’t ever scare me like that again,’ said Ron, hugging her tighter.

‘Ron,’ Hermione whispered again. ‘I...can’t...breathe...’

‘Right!’ Ron quickly let go of her, and saw tears in her eyes. He brushed hair back from her face.

‘You’re...you’re okay,’ he said, smiling, the lump in his throat making it very hard to talk.

‘I’m fine,’ said Hermione, running a hand through his hair. ‘Luna’s potion, it worked.’

‘When did you wake up?’ he demanded suddenly. ‘Why didn’t you wake me up?’

‘I’ve been trying to for the last fifteen minutes,’ Hermione said, rolling her eyes. ‘I started to worry a little, but then you started drooling on my pillow and--’

‘I do NOT drool!’ Ron said indignantly.

Hermione arched her eyebrows and pointed to the corner of her pillow, which was a bit wet.

‘Oops,’ said Ron. ‘Uh, sorry. I was really, really tired.’

She gave him a stern look that melted into a smile. The most wonderful, gorgeous smile in the world.

‘I don’t care about the bloody pillow,’ said Hermione.

‘You don’t?’ said Ron, shocked. ‘But house elves fluffed that pillow! And washed the pillowcase that I drooled all over! Honestly, Hermione, you’re not sending a good message to all the other members of *spew*--’

‘Ron, shut UP,’ said Hermione, and she kissed him. He shut up.

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## *Chapter Thirty-Eight: Good News and Bad*

Ron's head was spinning out of control at the feel of Hermione's lips; it had only been a few days but it had felt like ages. He tangled his hands in her hair and leaned into the kiss, deepening it as he opened his mouth and brushed his tongue against hers.

'When you're quite finished.'

Ron and Hermione broke apart, he leapt up, and he whirled around to see Madam Pomfrey standing near Hermione's bed with a bottle of potion in one hand and a small medicine cup and a thermometer in the other.

'Shall I take your temperature now, Miss Granger,' said Pomfrey, 'or wait a little while for you to cool off?'

She smirked at both of them fondly as they blushed.

'Now is fine,' Hermione mumbled, looking at her hands.

'Good,' said Pomfrey. 'Now, if you'll excuse us, Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger needs my attention. You can visit with her later.'

Ron bit his lip--he didn't want to leave Hermione so soon after she'd woken up. He wanted to kiss her again. He wanted to do more than kiss her.

'Okay,' he said instead. 'I'll see you soon, 'Mione?'

She smiled up at him, her face still pink. 'Later,' she said, smiling in that way of hers that was meant just for him.

He grinned back, feeling light and giddy from happiness and lack of sleep, and he backed out of the hospital wing, holding Hermione's gaze as Pomfrey took her blood pressure and her pulse and stuck a thermometer beneath her tongue.

He gave Hermione a wave before ducking out of the hospital wing, and he heard himself whistling all the way back to the common room.

He gave the password and clambered through the portrait hole; as he entered the room he heard a clang from upstairs, and looked up to see Susan Bones hurrying down the boys' staircase.

'Hi, Susan--' he began, but then he saw that she was sobbing, and she pushed past him without a word and hurried back out the portrait hole.

Ron stared after her for a moment, then turned to look up at the staircase, where he'd just seen her descend, and something clunked in his brain. He raced up the stairs, taking them three at a time, and stumbled into the dormitory, where the door had been left open.

Harry was alone, and he was sitting at his window, looking out at the grounds and stroking Hedwig's feathers. But for the movement of his arm, he was stock-still.

Ron swallowed. Something had happened. Something bad. He wasn't sure if Harry would want to talk about it. But Ron had to ask. If Harry snapped at him, he'd let it slide.

'Harry?' he said tentatively.

'Hi, Ron,' said Harry, still gazing out the window. His voice was definitely...off.

‘What’s up?’ Ron asked, and immediately wanted to kick himself. But what else was there to ask?

Harry didn’t answer for a long moment, and Ron said nothing as he waited for his best mate to speak. After what felt like an hour, he did.

‘When we were in the Riddle House,’ Harry said slowly, ‘and Voldemort threw that Cruciatus Curse at Susan, I jumped in front of her. You remember?’

‘Yeah,’ said Ron, wondering where this conversation was leading. ‘I remember.’

‘I threw it off,’ said Harry. ‘And I figured out why.’

‘Okay,’ said Ron, clenching his fists.

‘It’s because I love her,’ said Harry. ‘That’s why. The second he threw that curse at her I didn’t think about anything else but...but that I had to get in the way. I couldn’t let him hurt her. Not her. Keeping her safe was the only thing in my head, and when the curse hit me, I barely felt it, because all I was thinking about was her.’

‘Right,’ said Ron.

‘I suddenly knew...what my mum must have been feeling,’ said Harry. ‘When she put herself in front of me and took the Killing Curse. Like...like I was the only thing that mattered, and that her life didn’t matter as much as mine did. That’s what...I felt when I put myself in front of Susan.’

‘Right,’ said Ron again, feeling bewildered.

‘You’d do that for Hermione, wouldn’t you?’ Harry went on, still stroking Hedwig’s feathers, still speaking in that unnerving, monotonic voice.

‘Yeah,’ said Ron, without hesitating. ‘Yeah. And...and for you. And for my Mum and Dad, and anyone else I cared about.’

‘She broke up with me,’ Harry said.

Ron blinked. ‘Wh-what?’

‘She broke up with me,’ Harry repeated, his voice flat. ‘She hadn’t come to see me in hospital, and I couldn’t understand why she hadn’t. At first I thought it was her family, see. They showed up and they were worried about her and she’d had to spend time with them. But then...I was up and about and she still hadn’t come to see me, and I knew something was wrong. So...so I approached her and we came back here, and I knew something was wrong because she wouldn’t hold my hand like she usually did. And we got up here and...and I asked her why she hadn’t come to see me.’

‘Why...hadn’t she?’ said Ron. Harry still wasn’t looking at him, but Ron saw his shoulders rise and fall faster now, as if he were struggling a bit to breathe. He had stopped stroking Hedwig’s feathers; she hooted softly and fluttered over to her open cage.

‘Because,’ said Harry, a hitch in his voice, ‘she said...she was afraid of coming. She said...seeing me, knocked out like that and seeing me fight Voldemort--it reminded her, she said, of who I was. She asked me...why I put myself in the way of that curse and...and I said, “Why do you think?” and she said...”Tell me why, Harry,” and I told her I loved her. And she started to cry, and she told me she loved me, too, but...but she couldn’t handle...she didn’t want me putting myself in the way for her, and I told her that was daft...that I’d do that for her or anyone else I cared about...just like you...and she said...she said...”I can’t be with you, Harry. Not if it means...losing you in the end.” And I told her she wouldn’t lose me...but she said...”You can’t make that promise,” and she was right. Because...if I can’t kill Voldemort he’ll kill me. And she...she couldn’t deal with all of it.’

Ron closed his eyes, opened them.

‘All last year,’ Harry said, and his voice sounded strangled, ‘I kept...pushing you away, and Hermione, and everyone else. All of you kept trying to help me and I kept...throwing everything back at you and acting like a selfish arse and...and you all stayed anyway.’

‘Of course we did,’ said Ron.

‘I never thought, Harry went on, as if Ron hadn’t spoken, ‘that I might be hurting anyone’s feelings by pushing people away. I just...I didn’t want anyone to get hurt because...because of me. Because of who I am.’

‘It’s okay, Harry,’ said Ron. ‘It’s in the past.’

‘But today,’ Harry said, and he sounded as if he were struggling hard to talk now, ‘she...she was the one who pushed me away.’

‘Harry--‘

‘And here you are, you’re still here and you’re...you’re my brother and Hermione’s my sister and you’re all *staying* and you’ve always *stayed* and I feel like...do I even have the right to be upset and hurt that she didn’t stay, when I have so many other people who do stick with me? Even when I don’t deserve them?’

Ron crossed the room and sat down next to Harry; the other boy was looking down at his hands.

‘But...but...now I know. I know what it feels like...to love someone and...and have her push you away...and...and...it hurts...it bloody hurts...’

Harry looked up at Ron, and his green eyes filled with tears.

‘Shit...Ron...’ He didn’t want to cry, he was fighting it, but a tear escaped and slid down his cheek.

‘It’s okay, mate,’ said Ron, and without thinking he pulled Harry into an awkward, one-armed embrace. The gesture unleashed the dam, and Harry, with his fists clenched in his lap, collapsed into Ron’s shoulder and began to sob.

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Ron had no clue how to hug his best mate, because it wasn’t something they did. Harry, for his part, did not cling to Ron at all; he simply leaned against the taller boy’s shoulder, and Ron stayed still, with his arm around Harry’s shoulder. Mum would have done this better, Ron thought.

A half hour later, Harry’s tears were spent. He pulled back and stood up, and coughed. Ron ran a hand through his hair. For a long moment, neither boy spoke nor looked at one another.

Finally Harry, wiping his eyes, looked at Ron. There were a million things in his eyes, and Ron understood all of them. How Harry felt stupid for crying, but that he also knew he needed to, and that he was glad Ron had been there, and much more than this, that Harry didn’t need to say. They would never speak of Harry’s crying again, and Ron wouldn’t mention it to Hermione, and that, too, didn’t need to be said.

The two boys went to breakfast and ate in silence. Ginny was there, and she gave them both concerned looks, but said nothing. Neville was sitting at the Ravenclaw table with Luna. Draco Malfoy was not there, but several of his Slytherin friends were, including Pansy Parkinson, who looked tired and disheveled, and Blaise Zabini, who looked bored and disgruntled. The Great Hall was as quiet as it had ever been; one could close one’s eyes and not realize it was full of people.

Ron was just taking a bite of cereal when the doors opened, and Dumbledore strode in, followed by the other teachers; only McGonagall was absent; Ron could only guess she was still recovering in St. Mungo’s.

Many of the students gasped to see Dumbledore. His stride was weaker than Ron remembered, but he was sure-footed nonetheless.

He took his place at the center of the staff table.

‘Your attention, please,’ he said, in as loud a voice as he could manage. But it was unnecessary, because by now the Great Hall was so silent one could have heard a feather drop.

‘I am pleased to report that the Dementors who were surrounding the grounds of the school have been successfully driven off,’ said Dumbledore, smiling. ‘As of today, you are free to go outdoors and enjoy this fine weather. Lessons are cancelled for today and tomorrow, but will resume after that, as will exams, should any teachers be inclined to give them. O.W.Ls and N.E.W.Ts will be held as scheduled.’

This flurry of news was meant alternately with cheers and groans, and Dumbledore raised his hands and again called for quiet.

‘I want to express...how very proud I am...for the students, the teachers, and the Aurors who have fought so bravely to defend this school, and have come together to help one another through these difficult days,’ he said. ‘Voldemort [at this several students whimpered] has tried time and again to divide us; you have stood together and thwarted him, and for that...you are all to be commended.’

And with this, he began to clap solemnly, and the other teachers and Aurors followed suit. It was an off-putting moment for Ron; he didn’t feel especially heroic, not when so many people had been killed, and so many others badly hurt. And Voldemort was still out there...

‘The threats we faced before have not been eradicated,’ Dumbledore said. ‘We must continue to be vigilant. But if we can continue to stand together, we will defeat those threats, once and for all. I ask all of you to keep in your hearts and minds those who have died, and to honor their memories by standing with your fellow students, and

teachers. Only by uniting, and staying united, can we eliminate, once and for all, the threats that face us.'

He paused, and nobody said a word.

'That's all,' he said. 'Please, continue to enjoy your excellent breakfast, and by all means, get outside into the fresh air.'

And with that, Dumbledore sat down, and the other teachers followed suit. Ron watched Snape for a moment; the Potions master was as pasty as ever, and when he reached for a pitcher of water, his sleeve fell back and Ron saw a bandage on his arm. Ron felt a flash of anger.

Harry, too, was staring at Snape; the expression in his green eyes was indecipherable.

'What?' Ron whispered.

'Snape blew his cover,' said Harry in a low voice. 'Voldemort will be after him now.'

'Yeah, well,' said Ron darkly, 'I can't say I feel too sorry for him. Not after what he let Dolohov do.'

Harry nodded, but said nothing. He was staring across the room at something. Ron followed his gaze, and his eyes fell on Susan Bones. She was getting up quickly and avoiding Harry's eyes.

'Harry...' Ron began. Harry was clenching his fists; he looked down at his empty cereal bowl. Ron took a deep breath; he could think of only one thing that might make Harry feel even a little better.

‘Let’s take a fly, yeah?’ he suggested.

Harry looked up at him. ‘Yeah.’ They both got up to fetch their brooms.

They flew for three hours, passing a Quaffle lazily back and forth; they didn’t speak.

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Hermione was let out of hospital that afternoon. She found out--Ron wasn’t sure how--that Susan had dumped Harry, and the first thing she tried to do was seek him out to talk to him, and when Ron tried to stop her, she got upset, and in the middle of the common room, they began to row.

‘Why shouldn’t I talk to him?’ she said angrily.

‘Because he doesn’t want to talk!’ said Ron, groaning. ‘Hermione, you can’t force him.’

‘He has to deal with it somehow, doesn’t he?’ said Hermione. ‘He’s always bottling things up until they explode, it’s not healthy--’

‘Harry IS dealing with it,’ said Ron. ‘Just because he isn’t crying on your shoulder doesn’t mean he’s not dealing with it.’

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. ‘He talked to you, didn’t he?’

Ron closed his eyes, then opened them and looked at her.

‘Yeah, he did,’ he said.

‘I see,’ said Hermione stiffly. ‘He’ll talk to you but not to me. Typical. I’m always left out of things--’

‘Oh, for god’s sake Hermione, this isn’t about you!’ Ron snapped.

‘I never said it was!’ Hermione protested.

‘Then stop acting like Harry’s insulting you by not talking to you,’ Ron retorted. Stop taking it so damn personally. He feels bad enough without you adding to it.’

Hermione bit her lip and her eyes filled with tears. ‘Oh,’ she said. ‘I didn’t...I didn’t realize...’

Ron sighed, and he regretted snapping at her. ‘I’m sorry, love, I’m sorry I bit your head off just now.’ He put his hands on her shoulders. ‘Look, Harry knows you care about him. And he cares about you. But there are a few things he doesn’t share. You know that.’

‘You mean, not with me,’ said Hermione softly.

‘No, not with you,’ said Ron.

‘Because I’m a girl,’ she said.

‘Partly that,’ he said.

She nodded, and wiped at her eyes. 'You're right. I shouldn't take it personally. It's selfish. I just...I suppose I feel left out, sometimes.'

'We don't mean to,' said Ron.

'I know,' she said. 'And I know I get all...nitpicky on him. I don't know why I do that.'

'Because you care,' said Ron. 'Harry needs you, 'Mione. You know he does. But he needs you in a different way, that's all.'

'I get it,' she said, smiling. 'It's a boy thing.'

Ron smiled slightly. 'Something like that.'

Hermione hugged him then, and he put his arms around her, and he was suddenly grateful for the row, if only because it ended so peacefully, and because it meant she was as alive and as maddening and wonderful as ever.

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For a week, Ron was perhaps busier than he'd ever been in his life. Dumbledore had restored prefect patrols, which meant Ron and Hermione spent every night walking the corridors. They used patrols as an excuse for the occasional quick snog, but neither of them were inclined to completely skive off their duties (especially not Hermione), because of what had happened to the school.

Lessons resumed and Ron was appalled, but perhaps not surprised, that Snape was not only his usual hateful self, but that he was planning on giving what was, in his words, 'an exam that will make or break your future in this class.' McGonagall returned from St. Mungo's and she, too, was as strict as ever, and took up her lessons as though she hadn't missed a beat. Flitwick promised an exam but made it optional; Ron was going

to skip that exam but Hermione looked affronted by this, and Ron and Harry both relented and agreed to take it. Hagrid cancelled his remaining lessons and his exam, to everyone's great relief.

Ron's remaining free time was carefully divided up between spending time with Harry, Hermione and Ginny. He and Harry would fly for an hour or so every day, whenever they could get out, even if the weather was poor. They would pass a Quaffle back and forth and not speak, but Harry seemed to feel a bit better for their time together. Late in the evenings, after patrols, Harry and Ron would play chess as Hermione dozed on the sofa, with Crookshanks in her lap. The games were quiet, and Ron always won. Sometimes he would make a particularly brilliant move and Harry would smile and shake his head, and call himself a 'lost cause, where chess is concerned.' Occasionally Harry would make an equally brilliant move and he'd smile wider, only to groan when Ron claimed the victory. Ron never let Harry win, though--Harry would have hated that.

Time with Hermione was equally quiet; it was important to Ron, somehow, to just be quiet in the few weeks left of term, after all the noise and fear and horror they'd been through. Hermione still slept in Ron's bed, but they weren't inclined to do much more than kiss. They talked some, but only if Ron initiated the conversation; Hermione seemed reluctant to bring anything up, for fear of appearing pushy. But she was alive, and healthy--indeed, Luna's potion seemed to give her a kind of quiet but renewed strength. Ron was so grateful to fall asleep next to her and wake up next to her, he couldn't express it in words. He simply held onto her, hard, and hoped that she knew what he was feeling.

And then there was Ginny.

Ron would never forget that horrible moment in the Riddle House, when Voldemort had appeared as his teenage self and taunted Ginny. Ron was afraid for her, but he tried not to think about this. He simply vowed to do anything to protect her.

Ginny was spending a lot of time with Bill, and Ron noticed that she also was in company with Colin Creevey lately. Ron couldn't be sure if they were simply friends, or something else, but he found that this didn't matter. Colin was a nice kid, he was in Ginny's year, and she seemed to smile more in his company. That was what mattered for Ron. He spent some quiet time with her, but she didn't seem all that inclined to talk; Ron raised the issue of Voldemort only once, and she said firmly 'I'm dealing with it.' Ron could only nod and tell her to come to him if she needed to talk, and Ginny thanked him for that.

Their parents had come to Hogwarts and fussed over them; as expected, Mrs. Weasley lit into Bill for taking Ron and Ginny and Harry and Hermione to the Riddle House. Bill took his mother's ravings like the mature bloke he was, and Ron tried not to chuckle. It was always nice to hear Mum yell at somebody else for a change. But after a couple of days, in which Mrs. Weasley repeatedly asked if her three children were okay, that they all looked too thin, that they needed to be resting instead of worrying about lessons, Mr. Weasley gently suggested the two of them leave so that 'the kids can get back into their normal routine.' To everyone's great shock--probably including Mrs. Weasley--she agreed, and they Flooed back to London.

It was a week after the events at the Riddle House and Ron, Harry and Hermione were in the Great Hall at breakfast. Ron and Hermione had surreptitiously arranged themselves so that they sat across from Harry, blocking his view of the Hufflepuff table. Or not so surreptitiously, because Harry noticed at once.

'You two are so obvious,' he said, rolling his eyes and sitting down. But his lips were curled in a small smile.

'What?' said Ron, shrugging dramatically.

'Never mind,' said Harry, and he looked up from his cereal bowl to gaze at both Ron and Hermione. 'Thanks.'

They said nothing else for several minutes, but focused on eating. A flutter of wings announced the morning post. Ron and Ginny found themselves inundated with letters from their brothers and parents (Mrs. Weasley was writing twice a day demanding updates on their health, state of mind, Harry, and Hermione); Hermione received a letter from her parents stating that they were both fully recovered and were staying somewhere in the South of France; they weren't sure just why they had gone there but it had seemed like a nice idea of a holiday, and they hoped Hermione would join them after school let out. Harry received no mail at all.

Another owl dropped a copy of *The Daily Prophet* onto Hermione's lap. She paid the owl and it flew off as she unrolled the newspaper. She began to read the front page, when Ron saw her eyes widen, and she gasped.

‘What?’ he and Harry said.

Hermione looked up, and her eyes were filled with tears. Ron felt his stomach plummet. Wonderful, more bad news, he thought.

But then Hermione smiled. ‘Harry,’ she whispered. ‘You...you need to see this.’

She passed the paper across the table to Harry. He gave her a quizzical look, but took the paper from her and began to read. He, too, gasped, and his body went rigid.

‘What?’ said Ron desperately.

Harry looked up, and his eyes were red-rimmed.

‘Wormtail,’ he said. ‘He...he confessed...to everything. To framing Sirius...’

Ron stared at Harry. ‘You’re kidding.’

‘No,’ said Harry, his throat working. ‘Look.’

He passed Ron the paper, and Ron scanned it eagerly.

DEATH EATER CONFESSES TO FRAME-UP JOB

Peter Pettigrew, long believed to have been the murder victim of Sirius Black, was arrested in a melee in Little Hangleton at the former residence of the Riddle family. Thomas Riddle--who later would become He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named--had been using the house as a headquarters for himself and his Death Eaters.

Pettigrew, thirty-seven, was believed murdered almost fifteen years ago, along with a dozen Muggles, by Sirius Black, deceased. Black was arrested and charged with the murders; he was subsequently convicted and sentenced to a life term in Azkaban prison. Black made headlines nearly four years ago when he broke out of prison, and had been a fugitive ever since, until he was killed in a battle at the Ministry of Magic last summer. Black was long believed to be one of the Dark Lord's closest associates, and the Ministry pursued him right up until his death.

In a shocking series of developments, however, The Prophet has learned that Peter Pettigrew has confessed to a series of crimes--including those that sent Sirius Black to Azkaban prison. Pettigrew was interrogated by Ministry authorities and given Veritaserum after waiving his right of silence.

It turns out that Pettigrew was in fact responsible for the deaths of the twelve Muggles all those years ago. Even more shocking, Pettigrew faked his own death--going so far as to cut off his own finger as proof of his 'demise'--and

framed Black for the crimes.

Perhaps the most shocking development is that Pettigrew is an unregistered Animagus--a rat--and he spent nearly the entire period of Black's incarceration in hiding with the Weasley family of Ottery St. Catchpole, posing as a family pet. His true identity was in fact revealed three years ago by none other than Harry Potter (The Boy Who Lived), his previous 'owner', one Ronald Weasley, youngest son of Arthur and Molly Weasley, Miss Hermione Granger, all three of whom are students at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Black, and Mr. Remus Lupin, thirty-seven, a former teacher at the School. Unfortunately, Pettigrew escaped and returned to the service of the Dark Lord. It was Pettigrew who helped the Dark Lord acquire a physical form and return to full power.

Further evidence given both by Pettigrew and by Albus Dumbledore shows that Mr. Black was, in fact, actively working against the Dark Lord all along. Mr. Black's death at the Department of Mysteries last year was in the midst of a duel with an infamous Death Eater, Bellatrix Lestrange, who was one of the Dark Lord's most trusted followers and Black's own cousin. Mrs. Lestrange was killed in the recent battle at the Riddle House, where Pettigrew and several other Death Eaters, including Lucius Malfoy, were arrested.

In light of this new evidence, Acting Minister of Magic Amelia Bones has issued a full pardon to Sirius Black. In addition, Mr. Black is to receive a Posthumous Award for Special Services to the Ministry.

Ron looked up at Harry with wide eyes.

‘Wow,’ he said. ‘A full pardon.’

‘Yeah,’ said Harry, and he swallowed hard. ‘It’s good they finally...you know...’

Hermione was looking closely at Harry; he looked down at his hands. Ron knew he was trying not to cry.

‘Harry...’ Hermione said softly, and she got up and crossed to the other side of the table and sat next to him. Without a word, he hugged her, and she held onto him. He didn’t cry this time--he wouldn’t let himself cry in front of a room full of people--but he let Hermione hold him. She looked at Ron and smiled weakly, though she was crying silently, and Ron smiled back at her.

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The next week began. Ron was just as busy, studying, doing patrols, spending time with Harry, Hermione and Ginny, separately and together.

They learned, from Bill, that Wormtail had waived his right to trial and had agreed to a life sentence in Azkaban, after he was charged with a list of crimes so long it made Hermione’s rolls of homework parchment look short. Ron was immediately suspicious of this--without Dementors guarding Azkaban anymore, Wormtail was more likely to escape. But then Harry pointed out that Voldemort wouldn’t be too happy with Wormtail having confessed everything to the Ministry. Wormtail was probably safer inside the wizard prison than anywhere else.

Lucius Malfoy, however, was to stand trial. He had immediately hired several expensive lawyers and had maintained a stony silence, in the face of hundreds of charges of corruption, torture, bribery, extortion, conspiracy and of course, murder. All of this was in the news, but what wasn’t in the news was the fate of Draco.

Draco had been suspended from school, pending a Ministry hearing. He was still at the school, under 'house arrest' and being escorted everywhere by Aurors. He'd had his wand taken from him, but not broken in two.

The evidence against Draco was more than enough to ensure his expulsion, especially since there was nobody available--or willing--to testify on his behalf. But Bill told Ron and the others that the Ministry was in fact working on a deal with Draco: if he testified against his father at the older Malfoy's trial, he would most likely be allowed to come back to school.

'That's rubbish!' said Ron hotly. 'All he has to do is say what a sicko his dad is and he gets to come back to school just like that?'

'Just like that,' said Bill glumly. 'The problem is that Lucius Malfoy isn't about to confess to a damn thing, and he's spent years covering his tracks. Draco's testimony might be the only thing that can convict him.'

'You really think Malfoy would testify against his own father?' said Harry doubtfully.

'He should, shouldn't he?' said Hermione indignantly. 'Not that I care for Malfoy but his own father tried to kill him, and he did kill Mrs. Malfoy!'

'I don't know if Draco would do it,' said Bill. 'Who the hell knows what goes on in that kid's mind? Talk about a screwed up family.'

'If he doesn't testify, though, that means Lucius Malfoy is out?' said Ginny.

'Probably,' said Bill grimly. 'You know Lucius Malfoy. He buys his way out of everything. The Ministry isn't so corruptible anymore, but Malfoy's got his expensive, flashy lawyers--justice comes a lot harder to crooks who have money.'

Then there was Snape. Bill wouldn't elaborate too much, but he did say that Snape was going to have round the clock protection upon leaving Hogwarts for the summer holidays, and Bill confirmed that Snape had indeed been a spy for the Order; now that he had blown his cover irrevocably, Snape was in as much danger as Harry.

Hermione then inquired after Eddie Carmichael's family, and Bill informed them that Eddie's remains had been found on the grounds of the Riddle house; Bellatrix had buried him after murdering him. Bill had been the one to inform the Carmichaels of their son's death; he hadn't wanted to, but the other teachers--and the Ministry--deemed him to be the best choice, as he had done similar sad duties while serving as temporary Headmaster in the absence of both Dumbledore and McGonagall. Ron took this news with a pang in his heart. He couldn't help but wonder what the real Eddie must have been like.

Ron, for his part, was sleeping badly. He had reluctantly started his dream journal, and found that writing in it only seemed to make his dreams more vivid and disturbing. Ron saw Dolohov's death over and over again, heard the sound of gurgling as he struggled to talk through all the blood that poured from his throat, heard the crash of his body on the floor as he fell. Ron saw Harry as he had been right before he'd passed out in the Riddle House, aiming his wand at Ron's chest, his green eyes flashing red. Ron saw the chandelier crashing into Bellatrix Lestrange, and heard Voldemort's voice as he taunted Ginny, and saw Hermione collapse into his, Ron's, arms as the sickness overtook her.

After three nights of restless sleep Ron went to Madam Pomfrey and asked for a Dreamless Sleep Draught. She gave it to him without question. He used it for the following two nights, but kept it hidden from Hermione; he didn't want to worry her about his dreams. More than this, he hadn't yet told her--or anyone else--what Dumbledore had said to him; he wasn't sure how he could possibly hope to tell her. She almost certainly wouldn't believe it. Ron himself wasn't sure he believed it.

After two nights of dreamless sleep, Ron felt a bit better, physically speaking, but his mind was still awash in horrific images during his waking hours. At the beginning of the last week of term, Harry approached Ron on that Sunday afternoon and suggested they take a fly on their brooms. Ron agreed, but halfway through, he gave up, because he couldn't focus on anything but Dolohov.

They landed, and Ron found himself sitting beneath the beech tree, staring out at the lake.

‘What’s up?’ Harry asked.

‘Nothing,’ said Ron, not wanting to burden Harry with anything.

‘Bullshit,’ said Harry. ‘Tell me.’

‘I don’t want to bother you with it,’ said Ron stubbornly.

‘Don’t be a prat,’ said Harry, his voice serious. He sat down.

Ron looked at him and sighed. Then he took a deep breath and spoke.

‘I killed someone,’ he said.

‘I know,’ said Harry. ‘Dolohov.’

‘How’d you know?’

‘Well, they found his body,’ said Harry. ‘I saw him go after you and...after what he did to Hermione...I just figured...it was you.’

Ron nodded and looked down at his hands. ‘He tried to kill Hermione,’ he said. ‘And me. He was pointing his wand at me and he was going to use the Killing Curse when...when I got him.’

‘Yeah,’ said Harry. ‘So...you killed him in self-defense. That’s not wrong.’

‘It bloody feels wrong!’ said Ron. ‘Why do I feel...like shit about this? I can’t stop thinking about it. I mean, I know I did what I had to do and...and I don’t think he deserved to live. Not after everything he’s done, and not just to Hermione but to all those other people. But...shit, Harry...why do I feel like I’m a murderer?’

Harry looked at him for a moment, then down at his own hands. ‘Maybe because you’re a decent sort of person, Ron,’ he said. ‘The Death Eaters, they’re evil, because they like to hurt people. At least, some of them do. And the rest are just weak. But...you’re not like that...people like you...and me...we don’t like the idea of killing someone, even if they deserve it.’

‘I guess,’ said Ron. He remembered that Harry would have to kill Voldemort; how would Harry deal with it when and if he did, assuming Voldemort didn’t kill him first?

‘I’m right about this, Ron,’ said Harry firmly. ‘That’s what makes us different from them. Dumbledore told me that once, and I didn’t understand what he meant, but now I do.’

‘Dumbledore would know,’ said Ron, shrugging.

‘Yeah, he would,’ said Harry.

Ron swallowed and began to pick at the grass with his fingers. ‘I s’pose...I might have to get a bit more used to the idea of...killing people. If I want to be an Auror. I mean, I guess...we both will.’

‘That could come up, yeah,’ said Harry.

‘And here I used to think the worst part of being an Auror was the possibility of ending up looking like Moody,’ said Ron.

Harry looked at Ron, and began to laugh. For a moment, Ron thought Harry's laughter was wildly inappropriate; Ron certainly hadn't meant to say something funny. But then Ron realized that it was the first time Harry had laughed--really laughed--since Susan had broken up with him. Harry's laughter hit Ron and he, too, began to laugh, and for the first time in days, he felt a bit more like himself.

## *Chapter Thirty Nine: Anticipation*

'Well, that was bloody awful,' said Ron wearily, as he, Harry and Hermione exited the dungeons in the aftermath of their Potions' final.

'Ron, don't swear,' said Hermione primly. 'But I have to admit, I thought Snape would go a LITTLE easier on everyone, what with everything that's happened.'

'Snape, go easy on anyone?' said Ron in disbelief.

'It's in Snape's nature to act like a prat,' said Harry.

'Harry, he's on our side,' Hermione said gently.

'So?' said Ron hotly. 'He let Dolohov poison you!'

'I lived, didn't I?' Hermione shot back.

'That's not the point,' said Ron. 'He should have stopped Dolohov--'

'Snape's on our side, but he's still a prat, so you're both right,' Harry interrupted pointedly.

Ron and Hermione glanced at Harry guiltily.

‘Oh,’ they both said.

‘Yes, well...’ said Hermione.

‘I trust my duties as peacemaker are satisfied,’ said Harry, smirking at them fondly.  
‘For today, at least.’

Ron and Hermione smiled at one another, then at Harry, very sheepishly.

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That night, Ron dreamed.

It was his most vivid dream since his conversation with Dumbledore. Only this time, it wasn’t filled with images of Dolohov and Voldemort and Hermione bleeding and Harry being possessed.

It was about Luna. She was outside, on the grounds, and it was dark out; Ron could see her from the common room window. The moon cast an eerie glow on the lake and her skin seemed almost translucent. She was alone, and she was holding something in her arms. A book. A leather book.

She was looking around her like a skittish, scared cat, when all at once she threw the book on the ground. Then she went still and took a deep breath, and reached a hand out over the book. Her lips were moving, but Ron couldn’t make out what she was saying. Ron tried to call out to her, but no sound came from his own lips, and he couldn’t open the window, anyway.

Luna closed her eyes; she was still babbling something, still holding her hand above the book, when she, and it, began to glow. First white, then red. Ron watched, transfixed, as the book burst into flame. Luna gave an unearthly scream that sent whole swarms of bats fluttering out of the trees. Ron covered his ears and tried not to hear that scream, but he couldn't stop staring at her.

And at that moment, in the midst of that unending shriek, her skin began to flush, and a fevered look came over her as the book burned and burned. Just as it looked as though she would surely catch fire, too, there was a flash of brilliant light.

Ron's eyes snapped open. Hermione was asleep next to him, on her side with her back to him. He took a deep breath, trying to slow his racing heart. He was covered with an icy sweat. Very carefully, he got out of bed and shook his head to clear it. The dream...he'd have to write that one down, he supposed. Reluctantly, he pulled his make-shift journal from his desk drawer and sat down to write, in as much detail as he could remember, the images in this most recent dream. He hoped with all his might that it meant nothing. Hermione slept on, without stirring.

Two mornings later, Luna Lovegood was discovered unconscious on the grounds, with the burnt remains of a book next to her. It was quickly determined that the book was none other than *The Book of Morgan Le Fey*. Luna's skin was deep red and she had a burning fever. She was dressed in her night clothes and did not have her wand with her.

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Exams progressed; Ron was quite sure he'd done decently enough in all of them, all things considered, but whether he'd be able to take N.E.W.T. classes in everything he needed next year, he couldn't say.

Ginny completed her O.W.Ls and vowed that if she ever laid eyes on another exam, she'd hurt someone. Ron wasn't entirely sure she was kidding.

Meanwhile, Ron tried not to dwell on his dream about Luna, but it was useless. He wondered if he should have done something or warned someone--he thought he should have. But then Neville told him that Luna was already recovering, and that the

book had to be destroyed anyway, and Ron was only more confused. Why have a dream about that at all, he wondered, if I'm not even supposed to interfere?

All told, Ron could only hope even harder that what Dumbledore had said wasn't true.

Finally, the last day of term came. Ron and Harry spent much of the morning flying, but then Harry announced he wanted some time alone. Ron relented, and worried only a little that Harry might wind up wallowing in his misery.

The afternoon came, and Ron and Hermione ate lunch outside under the beech tree. Hermione asked after Harry, and Ron told her.

'Are you...sure he should be alone?' she asked, very tentatively.

Ron looked at her. 'I dunno,' he said honestly. 'But...well...he wanted to be, and you know how he is. He seems better though. At least...as much as we can expect.'

Hermione nodded, but then Ron felt her looking at him.

'What?' he said.

'Something's wrong,' she said. 'I can tell.'

Ron swallowed. 'It's nothing,' he said.

'Ron,' said Hermione, in her I Don't Believe You voice. 'Please tell me.'

Ron looked out at the lake. He couldn't keep hiding from her. She knew SOMETHING was off, the way he was so tired all the time and the fact that he wasn't sleeping well. He still hadn't told her of his talk with Dumbledore, but perhaps...now was the time. She was his girlfriend, and his best friend. She deserved the truth.

'Look, if I tell you,' he said slowly, 'you have to promise...not to laugh. Okay?'

'Why would I laugh?' said Hermione.

'Just...please promise,' he said. 'And promise that you won't get upset or...or freak out or anything.'

Hermione looked at him warily. 'How can I promise that if I don't know what you're going to tell me? What if it is upsetting?'

'Hermione, please,' Ron begged.

Her eyes widened. 'Oh...okay.'

Ron took a deep breath. 'Okay. When you were in hospital, before you woke up, Dumbledore and me...we had this...conversation.'

'Oh,' said Hermione again. 'What...what did you discuss?'

'Harry, mostly,' said Ron. 'Well, at least, half the time. He told me about how Voldemort is trying to get Harry. You know, to possess him and make him...hurt us. And how...I managed to get through to Harry before he did.'

'Oh,' said Hermione a third time. 'But...Ron I knew that already. I mean, I figured it out, anyway.'

‘That’s not all we talked about,’ said Ron. ‘We talked about...well...me.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah,’ said Ron. ‘Uh...see...Dumbledore thinks...well...I’ve had these dreams...on and off this year. And...I had those visions, from the brain.’

Hermione stiffened. ‘Right.’

‘And I talked to Dumbledore about this stuff and...he seems to think...well...’

Ron’s voice trailed off. Saying it aloud only made it seem more ridiculous.

‘What?’ Hermione urged.

‘He thinks I could...be a Seer,’ Ron mumbled.

Hermione said nothing. She didn’t gasp, or protest, or laugh.

‘Dumbledore thinks so?’ she said instead, and her tone was so impassive Ron looked up.

‘Yeah,’ said Ron. ‘But...look, he doesn’t know, and I don’t know...and he said it might not be true. He just said...that brain that attacked me last year was the brain of this true Seer--I dunno who--and...that it, I dunno, unlocked something...and...shit, it all sounds ridiculous, doesn’t it?’

There was a pause before Hermione spoke.

‘I don’t think it’s ridiculous,’ she said at last.

Ron stared at her. ‘You...don’t?’ he managed. How could this be? Hermione, his logical, analytical, there must be proof of something for it to exist, dropping out of Divination girlfriend, didn’t think the idea that Ron might be a Seer was ridiculous?

‘No, I don’t,’ she said.

‘But...but you always said Divination was rubbish,’ Ron said weakly.

‘Well, a lot of it is,’ Hermione said, a little defensively. ‘And Trelawney definitely is. But...well...look at that prophecy about Harry. I mean, I certainly don’t think fate is unchangeable or anything but...well...aren’t there some things that go beyond logical understanding?’

Ron gaped at her. ‘I can’t believe you’re saying this. You...you always say that without proof of something...what happened to change your mind, anyway?’

‘Almost dying,’ she said bluntly, and Ron shut up at once. Her eyes softened and she went on.

‘Look, Ron, I think I’ve been a bit...narrow-minded about things,’ she said. ‘And, well, it’s because...I’m scared. I don’t want things not to make sense. That’s why...I think I love books so much. Everything makes sense in them, and logic, too--even if something is terrible, as long as it’s logical, I can deal with it. But...not everything is logical, is it?’

‘No,’ said Ron slowly.

'I mean, all these people who died, when the school was attacked,' she said sadly. 'There wasn't really any sense to it, was there? They were just...in the way. And then I think...I think about how we escaped this time, and how we've escaped so many times, and how Harry's escaped and...well...it's rather a bit of a miracle, isn't it?'

'Yeah,' said Ron. 'It is.'

'All my life I wanted answers to everything,' she said. 'But...sometimes there aren't any, are there?'

'No, they're not,' Ron agreed, and he felt his heart clench, because he knew what it must be costing her to admit all of this.

'So it's not ridiculous...that you could be a Seer, Ron,' she said. 'I mean, that's not to say I'm not sceptical, but...maybe you are.'

Ron closed his eyes. 'I hope not.'

'Why not?' said Hermione, perplexed. 'It could be so helpful to Harry.'

Ron looked at her. 'That's what Dumbledore said but...but what if I am and it doesn't make a difference? What if...I have all these horrible dreams about stuff happening and I can't stop them from happening? What if it gets out that I am...one of those people and...and suddenly there are all these people coming after me trying to get me to read their bloody fortunes or tea leaves or something?'

'Ron, you've always said you wanted to do something important,' said Hermione gently. 'This could be it.'

Ron groaned and lay back on the grass. 'Bloody hell.'

Hermione didn't correct him this time. She just said, 'What?'

'I DID want to do something important,' said Ron. 'Ever since I was little and I saw everything that my brothers did. My first year, Harry and I, we stayed here Christmas, remember? And Harry found this mirror. The Mirror of Erised. He got obsessed with it, because every time he looked in it he saw his mum and dad and all his relatives--people he'd never met. He showed it to me, he thought if I looked into it I'd see his parents, too. But I didn't. I saw myself, grown up. I was Head Boy, Quidditch captain, the most popular bloke in school. The mirror was supposed to show the thing a person wanted most out of everything, but it was different for everybody. So Harry saw his parents, and I saw a bloody Head Boy badge and a Quidditch trophy.'

'Ron--'

'I mean, that was the only way I could beat my brothers, you know?' Ron went on, not hearing her. He was yanking up blades of grass with his free hand. 'I'd have to be Head Boy *and* Quidditch captain *and* be the most popular bloke in the school. But instead my 'big things' so far are that I killed someone and that I might be a nutter like Trelawney.'

'Ron,' said Hermione firmly. 'You're not the only one in your family to have killed someone. Percy, remember? He killed a Death Eater, too. And he went after those Dementors, to save your dad.' Ron swallowed. He had forgotten about that. Did Percy have nightmares, then, about the man he'd killed? Or did he sleep easy knowing that he, Percy, had acted in self-defense? That he had been brave and principled?

'And you're not a nutter like Trelawney,' said Hermione firmly. 'Do you really think Dumbledore would tell you that you might have Seer abilities if he didn't think it at least MIGHT be true?'

'I guess not,' Ron mumbled. 'But...dammit, Hermione. What if I can't live up to...the responsibility?'

'You can,' said Hermione. 'You've just never really had much confidence in yourself, Ron. You're so much better than you think you are.'

Ron blushed and looked up at her, and he loved her in absurd amounts at that moment.

‘Thanks,’ he managed. ‘But...I just don’t want to let anyone down.’

Hermione lay down on the grass next to him and brushed his hair--which had grown too long and shaggy--out of his eyes.

‘You won’t,’ she said, and she smiled a bit cheekily. ‘I won’t let you.’

Ron meant to tease her back, but looking at her just then, with the sunlight glistening on her hair, he found that he could only be serious. He took her hand in his.

‘I love you,’ he said.

She bit her lip; she hadn’t been expecting him to say that.

‘I love you, too,’ she said softly, and he kissed her.

They kissed slowly and deeply for several minutes, as if rediscovering one another; with everything they’d had to deal with in the past few weeks, they hadn’t had time to just do this.

After another few minutes of this, though, it changed, and Ron felt his whole body begin to burn from the inside out, and his trousers grew tight. He had missed this. He had missed her. His hands moved over her, and hers over him, over their clothes, and she made those little sounds that drove him mad, and he moaned, too, and the world began to go white again...

‘Ron,’ Hermione gasped, ‘wait.’

Ron rolled off her, breathing heavily, and blinked, his vision blurred, his mouth on fire.

‘Sorry,’ he gasped.

‘It’s okay,’ she said. ‘We’re just...outside...’

‘Yeah,’ he agreed.

‘And it’s...the middle of the day...’

‘Right,’ he said, trying to calm himself down.

He closed his eyes, and a long moment passed, and when he opened his eyes, Hermione was looking at him.

‘What?’ he asked, grateful that his pulse was returning to normal.

‘I was just thinking,’ she said.

‘You think too much,’ Ron joked, chucking her lightly on the chin.

‘Ron,’ she said, in a serious voice, and she tilted her head.

‘What?’ he asked again, and he sat up.

‘Do you...do you still want to...you know?’

Ron blinked. 'Do I want to what?' he asked, but he had a feeling he knew what she meant.

She took a deep breath. 'You know. Have sex.'

'Oh, that,' he said, and his heart began to pound again. Why was she asking him this? Could it possibly mean...

'Yes, that,' said Hermione, a little stiffly. 'Do you want to?'

Ron bit his lip and hoped he didn't sound too desperate when he said, 'Yes. Absolutely. I mean, uh, yeah, I do.'

'Okay,' said Hermione slowly, and she looked down at her hands as her face went scarlet.

'Uh,' said Ron, 'why do you ask?'

'Well,' said Hermione, not looking at him, 'I was thinking maybe...we could. You know. Have sex.'

Ron made a sound somewhere between a gasp, a shout of joy, and a choked cough. 'Really?'

'Yes, really,' Hermione said, blushing furiously.

'Now?' Ron asked, without thinking.

‘No, not now!’ Hermione said, rolling her eyes.

‘Sorry,’ said Ron quickly. ‘Sorry. I just...you sort of caught me off guard there, okay? I mean, I...wasn’t exactly expecting this.’

‘I’ve been thinking about it,’ said Hermione, ‘and I...I’m ready.’

Ron scrutinized her. She looked at him shyly and then looked down again.

‘Are you sure?’ he said. Please say yes, please say yes.

‘I’m sure,’ she said. ‘Yes.’

Ron let out a breath he hadn’t been aware he was holding. ‘Thank god,’ he said, again without thinking. ‘That is so cool.’

‘Ron!’ said Hermione, but she laughed as she swatted his arm.

‘Oh, come on,’ said Ron. ‘I’ve been in pain for six months, okay?’

‘Poor baby,’ she said, rolling her eyes, but she was still smiling.

‘I’ve been a good boy, though, haven’t I?’ Ron said quickly.

Hermione gave him another grin, this was very cheeky. ‘You have been...good.’

‘Hermione!’ said Ron, laughing, and he pulled her into his lap (where things were definitely starting up again) and kissed her. He kissed her again.

Hermione swatted him again, and giggled.

‘So, when?’ Ron asked eagerly.

‘Aren’t you anxious?’ she said, arching her eyebrows. And then she shifted in his lap, and her eyes went wide. ‘Really anxious.’

Ron blushed, but he said defiantly, ‘Hey, that’s your fault.’ He paused, and said again, ‘When?’

‘Tonight, you randy git,’ she said, giggling again.

‘Excellent.’

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For about an hour after Ron went inside, he felt elated, but then it slowly began to sink in. Hermione wanted to have sex. Tonight. With him.

The full meaning of this began to sink in and he realized that he’d never had sex before, ever. Which meant he might just stink at it. Then he remembered what Bill had said, and Ron was positive he’d stink at it.

Then he began to think of the whole stamina issue. How was he supposed to control himself when he finally saw Hermione...naked? Then he thought of the whole pain issue. He did NOT want to hurt Hermione, but Bill made it sound like putting the girl in pain was entirely unavoidable.

As the day wore on, Ron found himself getting more and more nervous about the whole thing. What if they got caught? What if he embarrassed himself? What if she hated it?

Harry returned from his 'alone time' and asked Ron what was wrong, but Ron quickly changed the subject. He was not about to bring up the sex issue when Harry was still so raw from his break-up with Susan. Ron felt a pang at this, though; it would have been nice to get some level of reassurance on sex from his best mate.

The evening came along, and it was time for the final feast of the year. Ron decided food might take his mind off tonight's inevitable activities.

The End of Term Feast was as lavish as any Ron had remembered. He filled his plate three times with as much roast beef, potatoes, green beans and bread as he could get his hands on. Hermione and Ginny rolled their eyes.

'It's not fair, how he can eat like a pig and not get fat,' said Ginny bitterly.

What Ginny didn't know was that Ron was forcing himself to eat, and trying not to look at Hermione, because every time he looked at her, he thought about her naked, and that wasn't helping him at all.

Dumbledore gave his usual farewell speech, but made special mention of Luna, Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville, Susan, and Bill. Ron glanced over at the Slytherin table. Draco Malfoy was not there--Ron could only guess that the little prat was holed up in his dormitory surrounded by an Auror guard--but his two thugs, Crabbe and Goyle were. Crabbe shot a murderous look at Ron; Crabbe's father had been among the many Death Eaters who had been arrested in the aftermath of the battle.

Dumbledore then called for a moment of silence in honor of Eddie Carmichael, who, he said, had been viciously murdered but whose body had been found and returned to his parents. They had set up a scholarship fund in his name, for young wizards and witches to attend Hogwarts. Ron glanced around and saw that many of the girls in all four houses had sad, horrified looks on their faces. All this time, they had been fawning over an impostor, while the real Eddie was dead. Ron suddenly appreciated just how far-reaching Bellatrix's murder of Eddie had been.

Dumbledore then announced the house cup results. Ron wasn't entirely surprised when Gryffindor was named the winner. Professor McGonagall and Hagrid both wiped tears from their eyes as the Gryffindors cheered and the Slytherins sulked. Snape merely glowered at the Gryffindor table beneath his curtains of greasy black hair.

The feast finally ended and the students returned to their common rooms to pack. Ron hadn't even begun his packing--as usual he had procrastinated on it and would probably resort to stuffing his clothes, books and supplies inside in his usual messy fashion.

Ron entered the common room, followed by Harry and Hermione (he still couldn't bring himself to look at Hermione without thinking naughty thoughts, so he stared at his shoes the whole time), to find it festively decorated. The presence of banners all over the room that read 'CUNGRADULASHUNS STOODINTS!' meant that Dobby the house elf had been here during the feast.

The atmosphere of the common room as it filled up immediately became that of a party. Professor McGonagall appeared with several house elves (who for some reason had deigned to finally come into Gryffindor tower--perhaps because Hermione hadn't knitted any elf hats or socks in months). The house elves had brought barrels and barrels of butter beer and even more sweets. Ron found room to eat a few Chocolate Frogs as the celebrations got under way.

Harry and Ron chatted for a bit; then Ginny came over, and the three of them talked for a bit, and then Harry and Ginny went off to a corner of the room. Ron polished off a fourth frog and then decided perhaps he ought to get his packing done now, so that he could enjoy the festivities without packing hanging over his head. He gave Hermione a quick peck on the cheek, trying to think of nasty things so as not to cause problems down south, and strode up the staircase to his dormitory.

It was empty--Seamus, Dean and Neville were all downstairs. Ron opened his trunk and began to dump his things into it; the only things he packed with great care were his Cleansweep and his Chocolate Frog cards. He found the little teddy bear Hermione had given him for his birthday and shook his head, smiling. It was rather cuddly, he decided, and it WAS nice to have a new bear after what Fred had done to his last one. And of course the bear symbolized his wonderful birthday present.

Which pales in comparison to what you're getting tonight, a voice in his head said.

Shut up, Ron thought. Best not to think of that now.

He put the bear down on his bed and began to pile his books into his trunk, followed by his robes and school uniform, shirts, pajamas, jeans, and underwear. He then went to his desk to sort through his remaining parchment and quills when he found something. It was clearly a note, written on rather feminine-looking pink parchment, and it was folded neatly and sealed with a bit of wax. He studied it for a moment and then the scent of lilacs hit his senses.

‘Hermione,’ he said, smiling, and he broke the wax seal and opened it. His eyes scanned the brief, neatly written script. He felt his stomach drop out from beneath him, and he read the note again, and again, and still again. He sat down on the bed and read it once more, his heart in his throat.

Ron,

*I’ve arranged for a private place for tonight. Meet me in the
common room at eleven o’clock.*

Love,

Hermione

Ron nearly fell over. She had ‘arranged’ for a private place? Good lord. And eleven o’clock was...three hours from now. Three hours. That was one hundred and eighty minutes. In one hundred eighty minutes he’d finally get to have sex with his girlfriend.

‘Shit,’ he said out loud. ‘Shit, shit, shit.’

In three hours...he would be naked. With Hermione. Having sex.

I can’t do it, he thought wildly. I’ll stink at it, I’ll end up hurting her, I’m going to make an arse of myself, she’s going to hate it, it’ll be a million times worse than my first year as Keeper, I’m going to look like an ugly prat with no clothes on...

He sat up sharply and felt slightly sick. For six months he’d been dreaming of having sex with Hermione, and now that it was imminent, he wasn’t sure he could do it. He didn’t know what to do!

Bill, he thought. I could ask Bill. Bill would know--Bill could give me lots of good advice.

Ron stood up, trying to calm the slightly woozy feeling in his belly, and he strode out of the dormitory. He only hoped he could remember everything Bill told him.

Chapter Forty: Awkwardness and Bliss

Ron hurtled down the spiral staircase, now in a full state of panic. The party in the common room was in full swing. He saw Harry there, still talking with Ginny, and with Hermione. Ron waved at them and raced for the portrait hole.

‘Ron, where are you going?’

He whirled around. It was Hermione.

‘Hermione!’ he said, his voice very high and squeaky. He cleared his throat. ‘I was just--I forgot something--in--in Bill’s office.’

She smiled at him and strode toward him. Ron swallowed. She leaned up on tip-toe and whispered in his ear.

‘Did you get my note?’

Ron closed his eyes--her warm breath on his ear was making him dizzy.

‘Oh, that,’ he said, his throat working. ‘Uh, yeah. I got it. Thanks. I mean, uh, definitely. See you there.’

‘Are you sure you’re all right?’

‘Fine,’ said Ron, smiling a huge, unnatural smile. ‘Just fine. I, uh, just have to get the thing.’

‘What thing?’

‘You know, the thing,’ Ron said quickly, turning and crawling into the portrait hole. ‘The thing in Bill’s office. Be back soon!’

‘Ron!’

But Ron had already burst through the portrait hole. He took off at a sprint down the corridors, down the stairs, desperate to get to Bill’s office. He flew past Filch, who snapped ‘Slow down, ye brat!’ He raced past Peeves, who just missed dropping a potted plant on his head. He raced through Nearly Headless Nick, not even feeling the flash of cold that always came when one passed through a ghost. He raced past McGonagall, who seemed to have been returning to the

Gryffindor tower from Dumbledore's office

'Careful, Weasley!'

He ignored them all. After what seemed like he had run for hours, he reached Bill's office door. Panting, Ron began to bang on it.

'Bill!' he yelled, not caring about what rules he was breaking or that his voice echoed down the halls. 'Bill, open up! Bill!'

Ron continued to pound on the door even as he heard soft footsteps. The door opened.

'Bill!' Ron yelled.

'What the bloody hell is going on?' Bill snapped, looking very irritated. Ron saw that his brother was shirtless and wore pajama pants. 'What do you think you're doing, breaking down my door?'

'I have to talk to you,' Ron said, ignoring Bill's annoyed tone. 'It's urgent.'

'I'm a little busy right now,' said Bill. 'Can't it wait?'

'No!' said Ron desperately. What the bloody hell was wrong with his older brother? What was so important that he couldn't put it off for a few minutes?

'Weelliam,' a voice called. 'Where are you? I am waiting for more Eengleesh lessons.'

A female voice. A very seductive, heavily accented female voice. Ron gulped, and took another look at Bill, and suddenly understood Bill's state of relative undress.

'Oh,' said Ron. 'Uh, is Fleur--is she here?'

'Yeah,' said Bill, nodding angrily. 'She's here. And we're sort of in the middle of something, so if you don't mind.' Bill made to close the door, but Ron caught it and shoved his foot through the threshold.

'Bill, please!' Ron hissed. 'I'm a little desperate here.'

'So am I,' Bill hissed back. 'I haven't seen my girlfriend in two months!'

'This is important!' Ron said desperately. 'Please, just--five, no, ten minutes. Okay. Give me ten minutes and then I'll go. Please! I'm your baby brother.'

Bill sighed and rolled his eyes. 'All right. But give me a minute--I need to tell Fleur.'

'Sure, sure,' said Ron, now half-bouncing on his feet with nerves. Bill shut the door again. Ron waited. And waited. What the bloody hell was taking so long? Maybe Bill had tricked him--maybe he had gone back to Fleur not to tell her that he had to talk to Ron but to give her some more of his 'Eengleesh lessons' instead.

After what had to be five minutes Ron raised his hand to bang on the door again, when it opened.

Bill stepped out, wearing a robe. His hair was mussed, his eyes were slightly unfocused and his mouth had the distinctly pink flush of someone who had been engaged in something other than talking.

‘About time,’ said Ron testily.

‘Sorry,’ said Bill, not looking the least bit sorry. ‘Fleur’s a bit persistent. So what the hell is so important that you have to interrupt me?’

‘Right,’ said Ron, suddenly feeling incredibly stupid. Standing here outside his older brother’s office, seeing his brother in a state of half-undress and knowing what had been going on inside that office, and what would resume once Ron left, made Ron feel like perhaps the world’s biggest loser.

‘Well?’ said Bill.

‘Uh,’ said Ron. He took a deep breath and pulled Hermione’s note from out of his pocket. ‘I got this.’ He shoved the note in Bill’s hand.

Bill unfolded it and read it, and his face creased into a frown.

‘Is this what I think it is?’ he said.

‘Hermione...she...well...’ Ron stammered. ‘Sex.’

Bill sniggered, and Ron gave him a dirty look.

‘Congratulations,’ said Bill dryly. ‘Sounds like tonight is your big night.’

‘Yeah,’ said Ron, his eyes huge.

‘You don’t look too pleased about it,’ said Bill. ‘Matter of fact you look downright terrified.’

‘Uh huh,’ said Ron. ‘What do I do?’

Bill eyed Ron, bemused. ‘Well, I think it would be polite if you met Hermione in the common room at eleven o’clock.’

‘That’s not what I mean!’ said Ron impatiently.

‘Do you WANT to--’

‘Yes!’ said Ron.

‘Then what’s the problem?’

‘I don’t know what to do!’ said Ron desperately, struggling not to raise his voice. It would be easier if they could talk in Bill’s office, but not if Fleur was in the next room to overhear them.

‘You don’t know what to do,’ Bill repeated. ‘Are you saying I’m going to have to explain the mechanics of--’

‘No!’ said Ron angrily. ‘I KNOW how it works, okay? But I don’t--I mean-- bloody hell. How do I--do it--I mean--howdoImakeitreallygood?’ The last words came out in a rush.

‘You’re joking, right?’ said Bill. ‘You want me to tell you how to be the World’s Greatest Lover in five minutes?’

‘Something like that, yeah,’ said Ron.

‘Well, little bro, I hate to dash your hopes, but that’s bloody well impossible,’ said Bill.

‘What d’you mean, impossible?’ said Ron frantically. ‘Can’t you tell me anything, you know, helpful?’

‘What have you two done so far?’ Bill asked pointedly.

Ron blushed. ‘I’m not gonna tell you that,’ he said.

‘Fine,’ said Bill. ‘Not like I want details; I was just trying to help.’

Ron groaned. ‘Okay, fine, I’ll tell you.’ And he did. Very awkwardly.

‘I see,’ said Bill. ‘That’s pretty impressive, actually. But you haven’t done one thing that I think you really need to do.’

‘Yeah, we haven’t had sex,’ said Ron, rolling his eyes.

‘No, that’s not what I mean,’ said Bill. ‘There’s something a bloke can do for a girl before the main event. As a warm-up act. Something that really helps a girl...relax.’

‘But I have done that--‘

‘Think about what she did,’ said Bill.

‘Yeah, so?’ said Ron, confused as to just what point Bill was trying to make.

‘Well, little brother, it’s considered polite for the man to return the favor, if you know what I mean,’ said Bill, giving Ron a very pointed look.

Ron opened his mouth to speak, and then felt his throat close for a moment when the meaning of Bill’s words sunk in.

‘Oh,’ he managed. ‘That.’

‘Yeah, that,’ said Bill.

Ron thought about it. Well, it was definitely a nerve-racking idea but...if it lead to better sex, he was all for it.

‘I can do that,’ he said, nodding vigorously. ‘I think.’ But then something occurred to him. ‘What if she doesn’t go for it?’

‘In that case, there are two things you do,’ said Bill, folding his arms. ‘First, you try some gentle persuasion. Sometimes a girl thinks the man doesn’t really want to do it and that holds her back.

But if you convince her that you really want to, more often than not she goes for it. And if she does, trust me on this, she'll have a really good time.

'But if that doesn't work, let it go. It's one thing if she's a little uncomfortable at first, but if she's really adamant, you're not helping yourself if you try too hard, and she could get hacked off.'

'Right,' said Ron, trying to take all this in. 'And...uh...how do you, you know, do it?'

Bill groaned. 'What, you want a detailed description?'

'Yeah!' said Ron. 'I'm flying blind here!'

'Look, number one, I don't have time for this,' said Bill testily. 'In case you forgot, I'm busy. Two, even if I did have time to tell you everything, it wouldn't in the end be much good because every girl is different and you can't just go with "one approach fits all".'

'Bill, PLEASE,' Ron begged. 'I'm desperate. And...and don't you remember what it was like, you know, the first time you did it?'

'Yeah, I do,' said Bill grimly, 'and I remember Dad was the one who gave me advice, so count yourself lucky that you can ask me instead.'

'Dad gave you sex advice?' said Ron, appalled.

'Yeah, he did,' said Bill. 'But at the time he wasn't in the middle of shagging Mum so I didn't manage to piss him right off, like you're doing me--'

'Bill, stop talking about Mum and Dad having sex and HELP ME,' said Ron furiously.

Bill groaned and threw up his hands. ‘Shit. Okay, fine. You know what? Just wait here for a second.’ And without another word, he slammed the door in Ron’s face.

‘Bill!’ Ron hissed. He couldn’t believe it. His oldest brother was abandoning him. Or worse, he was going to make Ron wait while he had it off with Fleur.

But then Ron heard footsteps and Bill’s door swung open.

‘Here,’ said Bill, thrusting something into Ron’s hand.

Ron looked down at it. It was a book.

‘A book?’ said Ron. ‘You want me to read NOW?’

‘That book contains a lot of valuable information,’ said Bill sharply. ‘Find yourself a nice quiet corner and read as much as you can. That’s the best I can do for you.’

‘But Bill--’

‘Good night, Ron,’ said Bill, waving at Ron cheekily before again slamming his door in Ron’s face. Ron heard the click of several locks, and he was irrevocably alone. Abandoned by his oldest brother in his hour of need.

He looked down at the small book in his hand, and his eyes fell on the title:

The Wyatt Weatherly Wizard’s Guide to Wild and Wonderful Sex: Everything You Ever Wanted to

Know About How to Please the Witch in Your Life.

‘Okay, that’s useful,’ Ron said aloud.

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Ron raced back to the common room, with the book tucked tightly under his arm, the title obscured. He passed McGonagall again, who merely clucked disapprovingly at him. Peeves tried to dump a plant on his head and missed. Filch shook his fists.

Ron gasped the password and burst into the common room to find the party still going on, but dwindling. Harry, Ginny, Seamus, Lavender, Parvati, Dean and the Creevey brothers were all drinking butterbeers and chatting animatedly.

‘Ron!’ said Hermione. ‘Where have you been--‘

‘Talking to Bill,’ Ron gasped.

‘Why are you so out of breath?’ Hermione asked suspiciously.

‘I...ran back here,’ Ron panted.

‘Uh huh,’ said Hermione. ‘Did you get the thing from Bill’s office?’

‘What?’ Ron asked.

‘The thing from Bill’s office,’ Hermione repeated impatiently. ‘Is that it?’ She pointed at the

small book.

‘Oh, yeah,’ said Ron. ‘That’s it.’

‘What is it?’ said Hermione, and she tried to grab the book.

‘Oh, nothing!’ said Ron, quickly, and he came up with the quickest lie he could think of. ‘Just my dream journal, left it in Bill’s office. I should go upstairs, have to shower and, uh, you know...get ready. For later.’

‘Are you sure you’re all right, Ron?’ said Hermione, now sounding concerned.

‘I’m fine, love,’ said Ron. ‘Totally, completely fine.’

‘Okay,’ she said, and she smiled. ‘I’m looking forward to...to later.’

‘Me, too,’ said Ron. If I can just get upstairs and READ a little of this book first.

‘Okay,’ she said. ‘I’ll see you soon, then.’

‘Soon,’ said Ron, and he gave her a quick peck on the cheek and raced upstairs.

Once in the dormitory, he yanked his bed curtains shut and performed what he hoped was an Impervious Charm on them, and opened the book.

Please let there be something good in here, he thought.

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An hour and a half later, Ron closed the book. His eyes were huge, and his brain was overloaded. He had no idea how he was going to remember it all, and he'd only gotten through two short chapters. But he hoped it would do.

Ron hid the book under his pillow and decided to have a shower. While in the shower he remembered a particular piece of advice in the book, about preparing oneself for a 'night of love with your woman.' Ron thought it was a good idea, but the preparation required an activity that Ron wasn't given to do in a public shower. And the prefects' bathroom...Ron shuddered.

Ron stepped out of the shower, wrapped his towel round his waist and looked in the mirror. He had started shaving but he hadn't become very good at it. On the other hand, Hermione might not like it if his face was scratchy.

Especially if I'm going to...yeah, I should definitely shave.

He did, with a razor that his father had given him on their last visit to Hogwarts just recently. He tried to be careful but as usual, he nicked his chin, and it bled profusely.

'Shit,' he groaned, and he used a Healing Charm on it but at the rate he was going, he'd have a very mangled, scarred chin soon.

He entered the dormitory to find Seamus and Lavender entering.

'Oh,' they both said.

'I'm leaving soon,' said Ron quickly, gripping his towel.

‘So are we,’ said Seamus, ‘just...have to get a few things.’

‘I just have to change,’ Ron said uselessly.

Ron waited for Seamus and Lavender to fetch their ‘few things’, which turned out to be several pillows and some blankets. Ron wondered where they might be headed, but he had a very good idea of what they’d be doing once they got there. He just hoped it wasn’t the same place Hermione had picked. But then, Hermione would have planned for that possibility.

Seamus and Lavender left, and Ron moved to get dressed. He picked through his clothes, most of which were wrinkled, and decided he might as well try and dress up, just a bit, tonight. He had one decent Muggle outfit that wasn’t formal: cordurouy pants and a blue button down shirt. He could put his robes on over that and pin his prefect badge on, in case anyone wondered why he and Hermione were skulking in the corridors. Not that they had patrol duties tonight, but still, being a prefect did provide a good excuse for going outside the usual school rules.

He dressed slowly, checking his watch every few seconds. It was nearly eleven o’clock. He wondered if Harry would be turning in. He hoped Ginny was okay. He hoped he didn’t make a complete prat of himself.

At two minutes to eleven, Harry did indeed enter the room.

‘Hey,’ he said. ‘Where are you off to?’

‘Patrols,’ said Ron at once.

‘You have patrols tonight?’ said Harry dubiously.

‘Yeah,’ said Ron quickly. ‘Nothing serious, but...you know Dumbledore.’ As if that explained

everything.

Harry nodded; he didn't look like he really believed Ron, but he didn't push the issue.

'I'm going to pack and turn in,' he said. 'See you in a little while, I guess.'

'Right,' said Ron, hating that he was lying to Harry, but not wanting to tell him just why he wouldn't be back tonight.

'See you,' said Ron, and he left the dormitory and headed down the stairs.

Hermione was there, wearing her school robes, and she smiled when he reached the foot of the stairs. Ron saw Ginny and Colin still talking in the corner; they were sitting a bit close together, but Ron didn't really think about this, because Hermione looked so beautiful, and Ron was trying to remember some of the stuff in the book, anyway.

'Ready?' she asked, and Ron nodded, trying not to think about the double meaning of that one word.

'Let's do it,' he said, and then she gasped and began to giggle, and he went red. 'I mean, let's go.'

She took his hand, still giggling softly, and they exited the common room.

They walked in silence for a few minutes. Ron was so nervous he wasn't really paying attention to where they were going. He just followed Hermione, and she walked on slightly ahead of him, tugging on his hand.

'So...where are we going?' he asked, to break the silence.

‘You’ll see,’ she said, smiling softly, more to herself than at him.

When they turned a particular corner, Ron looked around and suddenly realized where she was taking him.

‘Hermione,’ he said. ‘Uh...isn’t that room sealed off?’

‘I got it open three days ago,’ she said blithely.

Ron’s eyes went wide as saucers. ‘Three days ago?’ he repeated weakly. Did that mean she had been planning this since then?

‘Nobody knows about it,’ she went on. ‘I decided to keep it a secret. You know, just in case.’ She looked back at him and blushed.

‘Right,’ he said. ‘Just in case.’

After a few more minutes, they came to a halt in front of the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy.

Ron looked at her, and she smiled and bit her lip.

‘Just...um, wait here,’ she said, and he watched as she began to walk back and forth in front of the tapestry; she looked like she was concentrating. And then it hit Ron like a ton of bricks.

‘I dreamed about this,’ he said.

Hermione stopped walking and looked at him archly. 'I know,' she said. 'For six months, you said.'

'No,' said Ron. 'I mean, I really...dreamed about this. About...you leading me to this room. It was that night you were in hospital and I fell asleep next to you and...sort of, you know, drooled on your pillow.'

'You...did?' she said.

'Yeah,' he said.

'Wow,' she said, after a minute. 'Well...I...I hope the reality is just as good.'

'It didn't go that far in the dream,' Ron said. 'You woke me up just as we were going inside.'

'Oh,' she said. 'Sorry.'

'Don't apologize,' said Ron. 'And...and anyway I know the reality will be better than any dream.'

She blushed. 'Um, okay. I mean...well, I need to walk back and forth again, because you sort of interrupted me.'

'Sorry,' he said, and she smiled and began to walk back and forth again. At last, a door appeared. She reached for the knob and opened it, and he followed her inside, holding his breath.

Upon entering, he let out his breath in awe.

‘Wow,’ he said, gazing at the room.

It was undeniably a bedroom, as evidence by the rather large bed near the center of the room. The room was done in shades of blue, and there were candles everywhere, and a fireplace in the corner that spread warmth and golden light. Music was being piped in from somewhere or something; Ron wasn’t sure how Hermione had managed music, but it was a lovely, soft, and sensual type of music.

‘Is this okay?’ she asked nervously.

‘It’s amazing,’ he said.

She smiled shyly at him and pulled him further into the room. She kicked off her shoes.

‘It’s completely sealed off from the outside,’ she said. ‘We...we can stay here all night if you like.’

‘I’d like that,’ said Ron, and his voice sounded funny in his ears.

Hermione moved in closer to him, and smiled at him as she tilted her face up to his. Her breath smelled of mint toothpaste. Ron lowered his head and kissed her softly, letting the warmth of her lips ease the tension in most of his body even as the feel of her tongue against his created tension elsewhere.

They kissed slowly and deeply for a while; then their arms went around each other and they pressed together, and the slow burn that had started in Ron’s trousers and spread out through his whole body became a kind of raging inferno, and suddenly they were kissing hard, and Ron was steering her over to the bed, and pulling off his robes. When they came to the side of the bed, Ron found the clasp of her robes.

She flinched and pulled back.

‘What?’ he said quickly, panting.

‘Sorry,’ she said, and she blushed. ‘I just...well...I’m a bit nervous.’

‘So am I,’ said Ron. ‘Even if...even if I’m also...really randy at the moment.’

She gave a little squeak and looked down, right at that part of his body that was most indicative of how he was feeling. Then she looked up at him, and leaned up again, and kissed him slowly, lightly. Her lips teased against his and this was as sexy as the rough, hard kisses they had just shared.

And then he felt her fingers brush across the front of his trousers.

‘Merlin,’ he gasped.

She continued to caress him there, and it was making him dizzy, and he was dying to get out of his trousers. But her movements were hesitant and slow, and he didn’t want to rush her; he let her take the lead. And he wanted to be absolutely sure...

‘Are you sure, ‘Mione?’ he managed, as her hands moved a little faster.

‘I’m sure,’ she said. ‘I want to.’

Ron nodded and brushed her hair back from her shoulders, and reached for the clasp of her robes

again.

‘Can I?’ he asked. ‘I mean, may I?’

She nodded, and he unfastened her robes, and slid them from her shoulders, and they fluttered to the floor.

And they began to kiss again, and more of their clothes fell away, and Ron wasn’t even sure just how they were disappearing. Only that they were. And then she pulled him down on the bed and on top of her, and he felt the familiar press of her breasts against his chest and he moaned because it felt so good. Only now it was even more so, because he felt her bare thighs against his. And at that moment Ron forgot about being nervous and found himself focusing entirely on her, and how beautiful she was, and he told her that, more than once. And then his hands and his lips caressed her skin, and Hermione didn’t even stop him when he moved lower down her body to ‘return the favor’, and that part of it was bloody brilliant, even if she did have to give him a little instruction. And when the trembling of her body subsided and he lifted himself up over her again, his nervousness returned, but it wasn’t for himself, it was for her. He settled onto her and then remembered, even as he was kissing her, that there was some sort of charm needed for protection, but she told him she’d already done it earlier, and that was brilliant, too.

And at last, he found her and moved inside her and it was the most wonderful thing he’d ever felt even as he tried not to hurt her. But she winced anyway, and tears appeared in the corners of her eyes, and he would have stopped if she’d asked him, but she didn’t ask him to stop, she just told him it was okay. And neither of them really knew what they were doing, and when they moved together it was a bit awkward, and then, almost as soon as it had started, Ron lost himself completely, and it was only after he experienced this greatest bliss of his life that he felt just a little stupid for not having lasted longer than ten...okay, seven seconds.

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Afterward, they lay side by side, facing one another, gently holding hands.

‘Are you okay?’ Ron asked.

Hermione nodded.

‘Did it hurt?’ he asked.

She nodded again. ‘But...only at the beginning. And...and before that...’

‘That was okay?’ he asked.

‘Wonderful,’ she said, blushing a little. ‘How did you know...how to?’

‘I didn’t,’ he said. ‘You were sort of telling me what to do, remember?’ He grinned.

‘Ron,’ she said, rolling her eyes. ‘You know what I mean.’

‘I...read about it in a book,’ he said.

‘Liar,’ she said, fixing him with narrowed eyes.

‘I did!’ said Ron indignantly. ‘Wyatt Wanker or whoever it is wrote a book called *‘A Wizard’s Guide to Wild and Wonderful Sex: Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Pleasing the Witch in Your Life.’*

‘Wyatt Weatherly,’ Hermione corrected.

‘Oh, you’ve read it, have you?’ said Ron, eyeing her archly.

‘I might have,’ she said, shrugging, and she smiled cheekily.

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A little while later, they tried again, and it was better this time, and it didn’t hurt her quite so much, and he didn’t lose it quite so quickly (at least thirty seconds that time, he thought). And then they held each other and talked some more, and Ron thought he might have it in him for a third go (he wished he could be seventeen forever) but Hermione drifted off, murmuring ‘I love you’ as her eyes closed, and that was okay, because Ron was tired, anyway. And no matter what, it was still the best night of his whole life.

And in any case, they could always do it again the next morning.

Chapter Forty-One: The Journey Home

Ron woke up at dawn, not quite sure why or how. For a brief second he panicked, wondering why on earth he was sleeping in a strange, and enormous bed, under blankets that were not his and...good lord...wearing nothing at all...when he heard a soft sigh next to him. He let out a breath and turned his gaze to the sleeping girl next to him, and a grin spread over his face and he slumped into his pillow.

He snuggled up to Hermione and wrapped an arm around her. He closed his eyes and nuzzled her neck. She sighed again and stirred, then rolled over onto her back under the covers. Her eyelids fluttered, and she awoke.

‘Hey,’ he said, smiling down at her, his fingers in her now very tangled hair. He began to trace very light kisses over her face.

‘Hi,’ she said, smiling dreamily. ‘Did you sleep okay?’

‘Yeah,’ he said, and he couldn’t stop smiling. ‘Last night was amazing.’

‘Was it?’ she said, arching her eyebrows.

He nodded. 'You don't...regret it, do you?'

'No,' said Hermione, and she moved close to him. He felt the brush of her bare skin against his and swallowed, and felt a whole lot of stirring down below.

'I don't regret it,' she said. 'It was lovely.'

'I love you,' he said, suddenly overcome with emotion, not quite believing the previous night had really happened. She turned to him and kissed him slowly.

'I love you, too,' she whispered. They kissed some more and Ron felt the stirring down below; morning sex sounded just fine to him, but perhaps Hermione wasn't as keen.

But after a few minutes of kissing, she shifted underneath him and took his hand and guided it beneath the covers.

'Bloody hell,' he muttered, when he found her. She didn't correct him on his language, because she was caught up in what he was doing, and it all progressed from there, with their hands and mouths, until they finally brought themselves together a third time, and it was beautiful.

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Ron was perfectly content to stay where they were for the rest of his life and keep doing what they were doing, but Hermione very practically reminded him that it would be very suspicious if they missed breakfast. Ron relented, but pouted a bit.

They dressed quickly and set to work cleaning up; it didn't require a whole lot of effort.

They hurried back to the common room, checking constantly to see if they'd been spotted. Hermione went first. Ron waited for a full minute, then went inside. The common room was empty.

Hermione was standing by the cold fireplace, smiling at him shyly.

'Well,' she said. 'I...I suppose I should change. For breakfast.'

'Me, too,' said Ron, feeling suddenly rather awkward.

'See you in a bit, then?' she said, moving toward the girl's staircase.

‘Right,’ said Ron. She smiled and started toward the stairs.

‘Hermione.’

‘Yes?’

‘Did we--I mean, was last night--it was real, wasn’t it?’

‘It was real.’

She kissed him quickly on the lips and started up the stairs.

He watched her go, and he wondered if he would ever stop smiling.

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Breakfast was a hurried affair. Ron was famished; he guessed last night had something to do with it. He was in a tremendously good mood. He couldn’t seem to stop smiling as he piled his plate high with bacon, eggs and toast.

Hermione had left the Great Hall early to finish packing; Susan was doing the same. Harry and Ron were nearly alone at the Gryffindor table. Harry was watching Ron with narrowed eyes. It took several minutes for Ron to notice this, so happily was he tucking into his breakfast.

‘What?’ he asked, through a mouthful of eggs.

‘You’re in a good mood today,’ said Harry.

‘Yeah, well, it’s the summer holidays,’ said Ron. ‘Course I’m in a good mood.’

‘That’s not it,’ Harry said..

Ron swallowed his eggs and blushed. ‘Uh, yeah it is.’

A grin broke out over Harry’s face. ‘You and Hermione. Last night.’

‘What about me and Hermione?’

‘You two, you know.’

Ron affected a lofty, disinterested air. ‘No, I don’t know.’

Harry rolled his eyes. ‘Number four. Sex. Shagging.’

Ron blushed even deeper red. ‘Oh. That. Well, I..’

‘I knew it,’ Harry hissed. ‘So, how was it? Where’d you go, anyway?’

‘Room of Requirement,’ Ron admitted.

‘And...’ said Harry. ‘How was it?’

‘How do you think?’ said Ron, and then he bit his lip when Harry looked down sadly at his toast.

‘Sorry,’ said Ron quickly. ‘Shit, I’m sorry. That was a bloody stupid thing to say.’

‘It’s okay,’ said Harry. ‘Really. It was...it was good, then?’

‘Yeah,’ Ron mumbled. ‘It was really good.’

‘More than once?’ said Harry.

‘Yeah,’ said Ron, and he felt very stupid and selfish for being happy about shagging.

‘That’s great,’ said Harry.

‘Look, Harry--’

‘No, I mean it,’ said Harry firmly. ‘I’m happy for you. For the both of you.’

Ron didn’t know what else to say but ‘Thanks,’ so he said that, and felt wretched anyway. It wasn’t fair that Harry had been robbed of that kind of happiness. Not just the shagging kind, but the whole girlfriend/boyfriend thing. Ron felt a flash of anger toward Susan, who was nowhere to be seen this morning. That was something at least.

‘What about Dumbledore?’ said Ron. ‘You talk to him?’

‘Yeah,’ said Harry. ‘He’s okay, but...you know, he’s so damn old. I mean, I guess I always knew that but the past couple of years. Anyway, he told me I don’t have to spend as much time at the Dursleys this summer, thank god.’

‘Good,’ said Ron. ‘You can come to the Burrow whenever you want.’

‘Thanks, mate,’ he said. ‘I...I think I will. That is, if you and Hermione don’t mind...’

‘Shut it,’ said Ron. ‘Of course we don’t mind, you idiot.’

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘And Ginny won’t mind, either?’

‘Why should she mind?’ said Ron, confused.

‘I dunno,’ said Harry. ‘Sometimes I think she feels a bit left out...you know, with the three of us.’

‘Right,’ said Ron, and his face darkened. ‘Well, that’s not going to happen anymore. Especially not after...what that sick freak said to her.’

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Ron lugged his trunk outside the castle doors to wait for the carriages to arrive to take them to the Hogsmeade station. The day was bright and clear. Hagrid had taken over herding the first years, for which Ron was grateful.

‘Students!’ McGonagall’s voice pierced the bright summer air. ‘Line up, please. The carriages are coming.’

Ron stacked Pigwidgeon’s cage on top of his trunk and turned to see the horseless carriages coming toward them. He gasped, and then understood.

Thestrals. Thestrals were pulling the Hogwarts carriages. Ron swallowed. He had completely forgotten about the thestrals. They were eerie creatures, horrifying and yet beautiful at the same time, with their sleek, black bodies and huge bat wings.

‘Impressive, aren’t they?’ said Harry softly.

‘Yeah,’ said Ron, feeling very strange inside.

‘Welcome to the club,’ said Harry, sounding very sad. Ron nodded, feeling very sad himself all of a sudden.

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The journey back on the Hogwarts Express was quiet. Ron and Hermione paid only cursory attention to their patrolling duties, and more than once one would pull the other into an unoccupied cubicle, lock the door, and they’d wind up snogging each other senseless for several minutes. Ron decided trains were absolutely wonderful things and couldn’t wait until the first of September, when he and Hermione could snog in a cubicle again.

Most of the journey, however, was spent in a compartment, with Harry and Ginny. Susan Bones passed by the compartment, and for a brief moment her eyes met Harry’s, but he looked away, and she swallowed before disappearing to another train coach. Colin Creevey made an appearance, and for a while he and Ginny disappeared, but then Ginny returned to the compartment alone. Ron wondered again just what was going on with the two of them, but Hermione had told him they were just close friends. And then Ginny would talk at length with Harry, and Ron decided that his sister was good like that--able to talk to just about anyone in a way that made the other person feel a bit better. A few times while talking to Ginny, Harry smiled. Considering that Harry had never before smiled in the aftermath of his break up with Susan, Ron took this as a very good sign, and when Harry wasn’t looking, he mouthed a quick ‘thank you’ to Ginny, who smiled and shrugged.

They played several games of Exploding Snap, bought all they could from the food trolley, and Ron and Harry once again played a few games of wizard chess.

‘Damn!’ said Harry, as Ron won their third game. ‘I give up, mate. Maybe you should go on the road, become a professional chess player.’

‘Nah,’ said Ron, folding up his chess set and putting away the broken pieces. ‘Too boring. Especially if I have to play blokes like you.’

‘Ha ha,’ said Harry dryly, and he dipped his hand into a box of Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans.

‘Hey, where’s Neville?’ Ginny asked.

‘He’s with Luna,’ said Hermione. ‘I saw them in a compartment when I went to the loo before.’

‘She took her O.W.Ls, can you believe it?’ said Ginny, shaking her head.

‘Sounds like she and Neville are getting a bit serious,’ said Hermione absently, thumbing through a copy of the latest *Witch Weekly*.

‘Good for them,’ said Ron firmly. ‘Luna’s a nice girl. Bit weird, but nice. And Neville. Well, I mean, talk about a match made in heaven.’

‘Ron,’ said Hermione, rolling her eyes at him fondly.

‘Did you hear about Malfoy, though?’ said Ginny, accepting a Chocolate Frog from Ron. ‘Bill says he made a deal with the Ministry. He’s going to testify against his dad.’

‘No kidding,’ said Harry coolly.

‘Does that mean--’ Ron began.

‘Yeah,’ said Ginny, sounding annoyed. ‘He’ll almost certainly be coming back to school next year.’

Ron said nothing. He wasn’t entirely comfortable broaching the subject of Draco Malfoy, because his feelings for Malfoy had become so complicated. On the one hand Draco had joined up with Voldemort, had betrayed them all to Voldemort, had almost poisoned Hermione. On the other hand, he didn’t have the will to do it, and he fought the Death Eaters who only moments before he’d pledged allegiance to. There was a small part of Ron that was grateful to Draco for, in the end, helping him get Hermione out and for using the spell that had resulted in Wormtail’s capture. Because of that, Sirius’s name had been cleared. And that was something.

And Ron would never forget the look on Draco’s face when his own father turned him over to be murdered with the rest of them. Ron tried to imagine his own father doing that to him, and the idea was purely hateful. Ron hated Draco Malfoy, but a small part of him was not only grateful to him, but pitied him. It was a very uncomfortable feeling. He shook his head and tried to think of other things.

He looked up at Harry, who was talking quietly with Ginny again. All of a sudden Ron realized just how much things had changed between him and Harry. How would Harry be around him and Hermione later this summer, when Harry and Hermione invariably came to visit him at the Burrow?

Hermione was right, thought Ron. It WAS simpler when we were little kids. Ron smiled when he thought of all that he, Harry and Hermione had been through. Burping up slugs, escaping a three-headed dog or a giant spider, taking exams, going to Yule Balls and Halloween balls, winning Quidditch matches, none of it seemed like a very big deal to Ron anymore. Important, but not that much so.

And then there was the whole 'I could be a Seer' thing, that Ron had not yet shared with anyone but Hermione. He had been keeping his journal quite faithfully, and so far, it hadn't really yielded TOO much information, but Ron had begun to wonder if maybe there was something to what Dumbledore had said. And the more Ron wrote in the journal, the less scary, actually, the whole idea seemed. He decided that he would be philosophical about it. If he was a Seer, he'd deal with it, and if not, he'd deal with that, too. Only in the fullness of time could he figure it out, so there was no point in getting stressed about it.

The events of the past year had irrevocably changed them all, and Ron realized with a jolt that perhaps all this was what it meant to be a man. To face one's fears, to make choices out of love for others instead of simple anger, to follow one's friends even to death, to become a better, stronger person, to be a part of something bigger than himself. He looked at Hermione, whose nose was buried in *Witch Weekly*. Then at Harry, who pushed his glasses up his and was comparing Chocolate Frog cards with Ginny. Something inside Ron flooded his heart and he felt a lump rising in his throat. He swallowed very hard and moved closer to Hermione, putting his arm around her, wishing just then that he could preserve that moment for the rest of his life.

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Ron pulled his trunk off the train with a jolt.

'Hello, Ronniekins,' said Fred jauntily. 'Lemme help you with that trunk. Twin! Help me out here!'

George rolled his eyes and joined Fred in carrying Ron's trunk to the trolley. Ron greeted his mother, who was crying ('Mum, get a grip, I'm fine, you just saw me a week ago,'), and his father, who was beaming with pride. Charlie was there, to Ron's pleasant surprise ('Stupid git, don't you ever do anything that barmy again. And I've already given Bill the what-for.').

And Percy. Percy looked a bit fuller in the face than the last time Ron had seen him. He was dressed in plain, dark blue robes and was leaning heavily on a simple wooden cane. He started toward Ron, limping noticeably, but moving quite well all the same. He stopped in front of Ron.

'Ron,' he said, nodding. 'Good lord, you're tall.'

Ron smiled. 'You feeling okay, Percy?'

'Yeah,' said Percy. 'My new accessory.' He indicated his cane. 'Penelope says it makes me look very distinguished.'

Ron smiled again, and then without a word he put his arms around Percy.

'What's this?' Percy asked, hugging Ron back.

'Nothing,' said Ron, coughing, stepping back. 'Just...just glad you're okay. You...you

staying on this summer?’

‘Yeah,’ said Percy. ‘Fred and George forgave me. They even gave me their room.’

‘Their room?’

‘They moved out a week ago,’ said Percy, smiling fondly at the twins as they greeted Bill and Fleur. ‘Found their own place in Diagon Alley, with Lee Jordan. The three of them in one flat, that ought to be...interesting. Mum’s sad about it, of course, but if you ask me it’ll be nice not to have to listen to explosions coming out of their room every two minutes. I’ll have plenty of peace and quiet to work on my cauldron thickness reports.’

Ron gave Percy a look, and Percy chuckled. ‘Just kidding,’ he said.

The rest of the luggage came off the train and was loaded onto carts. Two by two they walked through the barrier from Platform 9¾ and onto the platform in King’s Cross station.

Meeting them were Tonks, Lupin, Kingsley Shacklebolt and Mad-Eye Moody. Moody had on his usual heavy purple cloak and bowler hat. Tonks’s hair was bright blue and spiky. She wore jeans, motorcycle boots, and another Weird Sisters t-shirt. Lupin looked as shabby as always, thinner and paler than usual, but he clutched Tonks’s hand. Something was definitely going on between them, Ron thought, smiling to himself.

‘Harry,’ said Lupin, his voice a bit scratchy. ‘Good to see you.’

‘Hi,’ said Harry. ‘You-you okay?’

‘Fine,’ said Lupin. ‘Well, I feel better than I look, anyway.’

Hermione greeted her parents, who hugged her tightly for quite a long time. Past Lupin, Tonks and Moody Ron could see the pinched faces of the Dursleys.

‘All right then, Harry,’ said Moody. ‘You know the drill. Write to us early and often.’

‘Thanks, Mad-Eye,’ said Harry. He turned to Ron.

‘See you soon, mate,’ he said, clapping Ron on the shoulder. Ron, however, grabbed Harry and pulled into a tight hug. Harry paused for a moment, then hugged Ron back. They broke apart quickly.

‘So, uh, don’t go scaring the Muggles,’ said Ron, looking at the floor. He then shook Harry’s hand. ‘See you soon, yeah?’

‘You bet,’ said Harry.

‘Bye, Harry,’ said Hermione, hugging him tightly. ‘Take care of yourself.’

‘I will,’ said Harry, smiling.

‘See you soon, Harry,’ said Ginny, and she hugged him tightly.

‘Thanks for everything, Ginny,’ said Harry, hugging her back.

Ron noticed for a moment that the Dursleys were to a one tapping their feet impatiently, and that Harry’s Uncle Vernon was turning an impressive shade of purple.

Harry waved to them all and walked slowly over to join his relatives, who all rolled their eyes and him. The massive son, Dudley, walked far away from Harry, clearly not wanting to get too close to him for some reason.

‘Do you think he’ll be okay?’ Hermione asked.

‘Yeah,’ said Ron. ‘He’s got us, he’s got Lupin, Tonks, all those folks.’

‘Time to go, Hermione,’ said the kind voice of Hermione’s mother. She and Dr. Granger were heading toward the escalator.

‘In a minute, Mum, please?’ said Hermione. She turned to Ron and took his hands in hers.

‘I’ll miss you,’ she said softly, her eyes filling with tears.

‘We’ll see each other soon,’ said Ron, but he, too, was feeling more bereft than usual at having to say goodbye to her.

‘Write me,’ she said. ‘A lot.’

‘I will.’

‘You promise?’ said Hermione.

‘I swear,’ said Ron. ‘C’mere.’ He pulled her into a hug and buried his face into her hair. ‘I love you.’

‘I love you, too.’

He held onto her, not wanting to let go. ‘I dunno how I’m supposed to manage a whole month without a shag,’ he murmured.

Hermione pulled back and rolled her eyes. 'Ron!'

'What?' he said, feigning innocence.

'You're impossible.'

'You like me this way,' he said.

'I love you this way,' she said. 'Which means I am definitely mental.'

'I've known that about you all along,' said Ron, shrugging. 'I love you anyway.'

'Which means you're mental, too,' she said.

'Well, there you have it,' said Ron. 'We're perfect for each other.'

She giggled, and pressed something small and rectangular in his hand.

'You forgot this, by the way,' she said.

'What--' Ron began, and then he realized what it was. 'Oops.'

'You left it under your pillow,' she said. 'Thought you might want some light summer reading material.'

'Normally I'd say no,' said Ron, 'but as this is a subject that interests me greatly...'

Hermione rolled her eyes again, and hugged him.

'Just don't let Fred and George catch you with it, or they'll never let you hear the end

of it. Oh! And don't forget, you have Apparition tests this summer, remember?'

Ron laughed and hugged her tightly.

'Hermione!'

'Coming, Mum!' Hermione pulled back and was starting to back away when Ron pulled her close again and kissed her, not long enough--he hoped--to make her father angry but long enough all the same to--he hoped--convey everything he was feeling at that moment.

She blushed and back away and walked, very slowly, to rejoin her parents. To Ron's relief they didn't look upset that he'd just kissed their daughter in front of them. They waved to him and the other Weasleys and headed off, up the escalator. Ron watched Hermione all the way out of the station, until he could no longer see the bobbing of her curly hair.

'Let's go and get the car, dear,' said Mr. Weasley, giving Ron's arm a playful sort of punch as he walked by. Mrs. Weasley, still crying, hugged Ron tightly.

'That's so wonderful, you and Hermione!' she sobbed, and hurried after her husband.

'Well, well, well,' said Fred, clapping Ron on the shoulder. Ron quickly stuffed the book Hermione had given him in his jacket pocket. 'Looks like ickle Ronniekins has finally gotten the girl.'

Ron smiled to himself, and then at Fred.

'I got a lot more than that,' he said, clapping Fred on the shoulder and picking up his trunk.

'What's that supposed to--ohhh, no. Ickle Ronnie achieved Number Four!'

'No way!' said George. 'Our ickle sibling is a man!'

'He's even shaving and everything!' said Fred.

Ron ignored them, dragging his trunk and Pigwidgeon's cage toward the escalator. For the first time, the twins' teasing didn't bother him in the least. Let them think what they wanted; he knew what he meant when he'd said he'd gotten more than the girl. He felt a grin play across his lips as he boarded the escalator. Pigwidgeon hooted happily and fluttered back and forth, as though doing a wild, ecstatic dance. Ron grinned at the tiny owl.

'I know exactly how you feel, mate,' said Ron, grinning widely all the way to the car.

**THE END**

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